THE BLYTHE GIRLS: SNOWBOUND IN CAMP

LAURA LEE HOPE

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STILL THEY KEPT ON, GUIDED ONLY BY THE COMPASS NEEDLE.
The Blythe Girls: Snowbound in Camp. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 199)

THE BLYTHE GIRLS

Snowbound in Camp

OR

The Mystery at Elk Lodge

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE BLYTHE GIRLS: HELEN, MARGY AND ROSE," "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPDALE," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS," ETC.

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The Blythe Girls: Snowbound in Camp

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The Blythe Girls: Snowbound in Camp

CHAPTER I

Good News and Bad

Helen Blythe scarcely knew what to think. She went over the details of Mr. Bullard's 'phone call carefully.

"I have news for you, Miss Blythe," he had said in his kindly way. "I hope it will be pleasant news. Can you come downtown this morning—say about eleven-thirty?"

Helen said she could and wondered as she hung up the receiver what the call could mean. He had "news." He hoped it would be "pleasant news."

In a ferment of half-happy, half-fearful anticipation, the eldest of the three Blythe sisters went about the business of dressing for the street.

"Perhaps Mr. Bullard has sold one of my pictures," she thought. "Or perhaps it is only an order for more prints. Even that would be

good news enough, considering the present depleted state of my pocketbook."

With this rueful thought, she pulled a dark felt hat down over her bright hair, shrugged into a heavy coat, and picked up the aforementioned "depleted" pocketbook.

"Now *for* it," she murmured.

A glance about the orderly apartment assured her that all was spic and span— "Just in case the girls *should* bring some one in before I get back!"

Then out into the brisk sunshine of the early fall day hurried Helen Blythe, wondering, not without a touch of apprehension, what Mr. Bullard's "news" would be. Perhaps one of her paintings, supposedly sold, had been sent back and Mr. Bullard, with characteristic kindness, had merely tried to soften the blow by his promise of pleasant news. Perhaps—

"I won't go on supposing horrid things," she checked herself sharply. "I don't know what can be the matter with me!"

The subway bore her downtown with a satisfying speed and Helen soon found herself in the side street where Mr. Bullard, as critic and art dealer, carried on his modest, though profitable and interesting business.

Helen did not pause before the door of the art shop, as she had often done in the past, but

pushed it open and went in quickly. To her relief, she found the old gentleman alone in the shop.

The latter stood with his back to her, hands behind him, head bent forward in an attitude of close scrutiny. A large canvas set in imposing fashion upon an easel, appeared to be the object of the old gentleman's attention.

He turned at once, however, as Helen entered the shop. He came toward her with his pleasant smile, hand extended.

"Always punctual, my dear Miss Blythe—an unusual quality in an artist and one much appreciated by the art dealer, I can assure you!"

He asked after the health of the other members of her small family, complimented her on her appearance and at last, much to Helen's relief, came to the point of the interview.

"I have something to show you," he said, and led her toward the picture he had been contemplating when she entered the shop.

To Helen's surprise, she found that it was her own!

Her heart sank. She recognized the picture as one of those she had done two winters before. It was a scene in Bronx park, a snow-shrouded bit of landscape that Helen had thought rather good at the time. Looking at it now, she still thought it rather good. Yet here

it was, back in Mr. Bullard's shop, returned, rejected! She looked toward the old gentleman for an explanation.

But Mr. Bullard was engrossed in the picture. He smiled gently, nodded his head once or twice in approbation.

"It is very good," he said. "That odd light on the snow, the piled-up grey clouds! There is another storm coming, one can sense it in that chill greyness. You have the gift of color, my child. What you see—and you can see more than most people—you portray. See, it is all on the canvas, the grimness, the quiet, the snow-enshrouded scene waiting for more snow. Ah, yes, it is good. Better than I remember thinking at the time."

Puzzled, Helen waited until the old gentleman's ruminative voice droned off into quiet, waited while he nodded his head again once or twice and smiled to himself over some secret thought.

Then she ventured, almost timidly:

"You do like it then?"

He turned toward her, suddenly quizzical.

"Don't you?" he asked.

"Why, yes," stammered Helen, feeling that he had taken an unfair advantage of her. "That is—what I should have said—"

"Is just what you did say," finished Mr. Bullard, with a smile. "You have no need to

be modest about your art, my child. It is good. Sometimes it is better than others, but, all the time, it is good."

"But—I don't understand!" Poor Helen was more puzzled than ever. "If you really think the picture is good, why should it be here? Why has it been returned?"

Mr. Bullard's surprise was quite evidently sincere. He stared at the girl for a moment over his glasses, then broke into a genial rumble of laughter.

"Aha! So that was your thought! Your picture has been returned because it is not good!"

Helen flushed and felt uncomfortable.

"Not that I blame you for the conclusion," the old gentleman continued hurriedly. "It was the natural one to arrive at, I suppose, since you could not possibly know the real circumstances.

"No, no, my dear," continued Mr. Bullard, rubbing his hands together with satisfaction. "Your picture has not been rejected. Far from it! It is good—so good that it has already brought you another order."

Helen's face brightened.

"That *is* good news! What kind of an order, Mr. Bullard?"

"A rather large order," said the old gentleman, his eyes twinkling. He had the appear-

ance of a person who was thoroughly enjoying himself. "This winter picture of yours was seen and admired by the man who now wishes six more like it!"

"Six more!" repeated Helen, scarcely able to believe in such good fortune. "Must they all be winter scenes?"

The art dealer nodded.

"All winter scenes, yes. The buyer is opening a hotel, I believe, and he wants these pictures of yours for what is to be called a 'winter room.' It will pay well," he added, speculative eyes upon the girl. "The man seems to be one of those to whom money is no object."

He went off again into one of his thoughtful silences. It was several seconds before Helen ventured to interrupt him.

"Must the order be filled at once?" she asked.

"As soon as possible." Mr. Bullard roused himself from his abstraction and looked squarely at the girl. "In fact, if I were in your place, my dear young lady, I should start at once."

"But the snow," said Helen doubtfully. "Must they all be snow scenes?"

Mr. Bullard smiled.

"We can scarcely manufacture a snowstorm," he admitted. "I think one or two of your pictures would do quite well without snow

though I would add it whenever and wherever possible. Remember, it was a snow scene that first attracted the attention of our patron."

Helen Blythe went uptown again with her head in the clouds. An immediate contract for six pictures and at a price that made her feel affluent whenever she thought of it!

At the door of the apartment house where she lived with her two sisters, Margy and Rose, some one called to her.

"Helen, wait a minute!" cried a familiar voice. "Something tells me I'm going your way."

"Rose!" said Helen, turning to greet her youngest sister. "Aren't you home early, dear?"

"Yes." Rose's pretty mouth was grimly set. She shoved Helen through the door ahead of her. "Don't say anything until we get upstairs. Come on!"

Inside the apartment that the three Blythe girls shared, Rose pulled off her hat and flung it as far as she could into the living room.

"There!" she said, with a wry smile. "That should make me feel better, but it doesn't. You might as well know the worst, Helen," she said, facing her sister. "I've lost my job!"

CHAPTER II

What To Do?

"Oh, Rose!"

The ejaculation was wrung from Helen Blythe. She sat down rather heavily in a chair and stared at the younger girl.

Rose stared back, petulant, unhappy.

"Oh, yes, now the regular flood of questions," she said, frowning. "How did it happen and why? Is Lossar-Martin going out of business, or am I just a flop as a salesgirl? Go on, ask! I'm waiting!"

She flung herself upon the couch with such abandon that every spring creaked and groaned. She sat silent for a moment, face averted. Then, as Helen made no effort to reopen the conversation, she turned slowly, staring questioningly at the older girl. Something she saw in Helen's face banished the ill-nature from her own. She got up slowly and went across the room.

"Sorry, Nell," she said. "I'm always a beast when things go wrong. But you are just like Mother—sweet and patient and long-suf-

fering. I wish I were more like Mother, Nell."

"You are like Rose, and that's good enough for me!" Helen drew up a chair beside her own and patted it invitingly. "Sit down, dear —and don't talk unless you want to."

Rose obeyed. She rested her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes wearily.

"Might as well unburden myself," she sighed. "There isn't much to tell, anyway. In the first place, I told you the tiniest little bit of a fib. I said I had lost my job but that isn't —quite true."

Helen looked alarmed.

"Do you mean to say you haven't—"

"Not so fast! Not so fast," entreated the younger girl. "I'm telling you, Helen! What I am trying to say is that I haven't been pushed out of Lossar-Martin for good. I suppose I can go back later, if I want to. I have simply been invited to take a month's leave of absence —without pay."

Helen looked relieved.

"Well," she said, "I must say that doesn't sound so bad to me. A month's leave of absence, even without pay, might prove a rather welcome vacation, especially as it has a job at the other end of it."

Rose looked gratefully at the elder girl. Trust Helen, she thought, to make the best of a

bad thing; even, if possible, to turn it into something good.

"We have a new manager at the store," Rose explained. "We knew he was coming and dreaded it, because a new official usually means a general shake-up in the personnel. Well, he shook us up," she added ruefully, "good and plenty!"

"He was the one who suggested a month's absence without pay?" asked Helen.

Rose nodded.

"He gave us our choice," she said. "We could either take an enforced vacation without pay or get out altogether."

"But when you said that you had lost your job—"

"I had decided to get out altogether," Rose confessed. "I was mad clean through. Now —well, I don't know just what to do."

"Of course it's your own affair, Rose," Helen said gently. "But it seems to me, if I were in your place, I'd stick."

"I know that's common sense," and Rose nodded. "I'd look a long time before I found a job that paid so well. Then, too, I like the work and I'm fond of the girls. Just the same," she added, "I would like to get even with that store manager!"

While Rose Blythe is brooding over the injustice of store managers in general and this

one in particular, a few moments will be taken to introduce the Blythe sisters to those readers who are not already well acquainted with them.

Not so very long before this story opens the three Blythe girls, Helen, Margy and Rose, had been members of a typically happy, prosperous American family. There had been a mother and a father then and a pleasant homestead on Long Island and a garden of peonies and dahlias and climbing roses.

But the smiling mother died and left the family and the garden desolate. The father, not able long to survive that great desertion, had soon followed the smiling mother, leaving his three girls orphaned and almost penniless.

How the Blythe sisters rose gallantly to the occasion, bravely shouldering the burden of responsibility, has been told in the first volume of the series, entitled, "The Blythe Girls: Helen, Margy and Rose."

Once firmly established in the great city of New York, other adventures confronted the girls. Margy was left an odd legacy; Rose was faced by a problem that would have puzzled many an older and more experienced girl; and Helen took in a young boarder who becomes the center of an absorbing mystery.

After the girls have spent an exciting and interesting vacation in the country, Margy embarked on a secret mission that very nearly

ended in tragedy. Later Rose became interested in the missing daughter of a pathetic and kindly old gentleman, finally succeeding in restoring the girl to the arms of her father.

In the book directly preceding this, entitled, "The Blythe Girls: The Disappearance of Helen," the eldest of the Blythe sisters went on an adventure of her own, in which she helped restore a very valuable picture to its owners.

Helen, the eldest of the trio, was a blonde, with pale, soft hair and blue eyes. She had inherited not only her mother's looks but her talent for painting, as well.

Margy, the second of the sisters, was in direct contrast to both of the others. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, vigorous, there was little of the dreamer about Margy Blythe. An excellent business girl, she had found employment with Miss Dorcas Pepper, an elderly and eccentric maiden lady. Margy's association with Miss Pepper would have been altogether pleasant had it not been for Miss Pepper's nephew, Rex. The latter was a scoundrel and had caused unpleasantness for Margy on more than one occasion.

Rose was blonde like the eldest sister. But her hair was more golden and her eyes were a deeper blue than Helen's. She was vivacious, and was usually the life of any party she happened to be in. Rose had found a position with

the Lossar-Martin department store, one of the largest in the city. Behind the counter in the millinery trimmings department, Rose Blythe had met with many adventures, pleasant and otherwise.

In the course of their trials and achievements, the Blythe girls had made a few good friends.

There was Hugh Draper, the young lawyer who lived in an apartment below them. Hugh admired Helen and made no secret of his admiration.

There was Dale Elton, the young journalist who continually pursued Margy in spite of the latter's indifference. Dale was one of those people who will not accept "no" for an answer. Lloyd Roberts was another, though less persistent, admirer of Miss Pepper's social secretary.

Joe Morris, who had directed the removal of the girls' effects from the homestead on Long Island to the city apartment in New York could be counted one of their first and best friends. Returning with a strainer that had been left in the van, Joe had earned the sobriquet of "Strainer Man" and "Strainer Man" he had been to the three girls ever since.

But to return once more to Rose and her grudge against store managers in general.

"I *would* like to get even with that store manager," repeated Rose longingly. "It would do

me good to tell him what I think of him first—and then hand in my resignation!"

"Probably that's just what he hopes you will do," Helen surmised shrewdly. When Rose looked at her inquiringly she explained further. "This new store manager of yours probably has the usual economy complex. You are getting a good salary, Rose, and if you left he could probably get a girl to fill your shoes at considerably less than you are drawing down every week. So you see, by resigning you would probably be playing right into his hands."

"Not much of a compliment to me, the way you put it," complained Rose. "But I fancy you have hit the nail on the head, just the same. Well, I'll stick."

"Good girl!" approved Helen. "I knew you wouldn't do anything foolish."

"But there's the question of money," Rose protested. "You will miss my contribution to the family budget, small as it is, Nell. Margy can't contribute enough for the three of us. And you know," apologetically, "your work has fallen off a bit lately."

At the words, a warm sweet flood of confidence enveloped Helen. She had completely forgotten her own work!

She turned to Rose and smiled mysteriously.

"Oh, I don't know, honey," she said with elaborate carelessness. "You see, since you

left this morning, business has picked up. I have got a—a *contract!*"

Rose jumped to her feet; struck an attitude.

"Good gracious!" she cried. "My sister has gone into the movies!"

"This is a different kind of contract," laughed Helen. "Six pictures to be done as soon as possible. So you see there is no need to worry about money, after all!"

CHAPTER III

Margy Scents Trouble

Meanwhile, what of Margy Blythe, the dark-haired, dark-eyed, practical one of the three sisters?

As a matter of fact, at the very moment that Helen and Rose were making their decision regarding the immediate future, Margy was contemplating her future with a great deal of interest and considerable apprehension.

She sat at a desk in Miss Pepper's library, frowning over a sheaf of notes left there by her eccentric employer. They were scrawled notes, almost illegible. But this was not the cause of Margy's frown. She was thinking of one brief sentence dropped casually by Miss Pepper during the course of that morning's conversation.

"Might as well strike them off the list," said the eccentric woman, referring to a series of lectures she was to have attended that winter. "Off the list! Yes! I am going South."

"I am going South!" There it was. There was the sentence that had startled Margy. She

had nearly dropped her pencil in surprise and a vague dismay.

Up to that moment Miss Pepper had made no mention of going South. To speak of it in that way and with no modifying explanation was characteristic of Miss Pepper, but disconcerting to Margy Blythe.

How she had longed to ask questions! But, knowing her employer as she did, Margy had wisely refrained. Miss Pepper had been born to question, not to be questioned. Inquiries either inflamed her or made her morose. So Margy said nothing—and waited.

She still waited. Transcribing notes with her usual efficiency and neatness, one question plagued her constantly: "What did she *mean* by that?"

"There she is now!"

Margy's back stiffened at the sound of her employer's voice in the hall.

"If that woman from the Musical Society calls again, I am not at home. You hear me? Humph! Frump!"

As Miss Pepper entered the library at that moment, Margy was not sure but what this last uncomplimentary epithet was directed toward herself.

The young secretary went on frowning and busily transcribing notes until she felt, rather than saw, Miss Pepper standing beside her.

"Humph! Not through yet? Should be! Not much to do!"

"The notes were rather mixed up, Miss Pepper," Margy explained patiently. "I had to sort them out and put them in order before I could start transcribing."

"Humph!" grunted the old lady. "Hate excuses, Margy Blythe. You should know better!"

At the start of her association with Miss Pepper this sort of abrupt criticism would have worried Margy. She would probably have been angry, or offended, or both. Now, however, she knew better than to take her eccentric employer seriously. She had received ample proof during the past that the old lady approved of her, depended upon her, even, in her odd fashion, was fond of her.

So now, instead of flushing angrily, she merely lifted her head and glanced inquiringly at her employer.

"Something has happened to put her out of sorts," thought the youthful secretary. "She is worried about something and, as usual, is taking it all out on me. Now, I wonder what is wrong?"

Miss Pepper's next sentence was explanation enough. She sat down at the desk, fumbling irritably with the papers on it, while

Margy unobtrusively removed herself to a chair near by.

"Going crazy, is he? Humph! And who deserved to go crazy, if not Rex Pepper, like to know! Humph! Going crazy! Well, let him!"

Margy continued to sort the papers in her hands. Her eyes were demurely lowered. Once more, she was too wise to ask a question.

After a moment or two Miss Pepper continued. Although she seemed to speak to herself, Margy knew that the old lady was aware of an interested audience and, in some vague way, was comforted by it.

"Tried to make a man of him! Own blood and all that. Last of long line of respectable people, distinguished people." She raised her head and glared at Margy as though daring her to deny it. Margy said nothing.

"Whining now," continued the queer old lady. "Trying to get my sympathy. Wants me drop charges, keep him out of jail. Humph! Why should I? I say, why should I?"

Since she seemed, this time, to be addressed directly, Margy ventured to reply.

"I see no reason why you should try to keep Rex Pepper out of jail," she said quietly. "If he has to take his medicine now, surely it is no more than he deserves."

"Humph! You think so?" Miss Pepper

peered at the girl, almost anxiously, Margy thought. "You think so, Margy Blythe?"

"I do," Margy returned firmly. "You have been lenient enough with your nephew, Miss Pepper. And he has repaid you—how?"

"By taking advantage of leniency," returned Miss Pepper grimly. "Humph! You are right, Margy Blythe! Right, as usual!"

The old lady fell into a reverie, shaking her head at intervals and muttering to herself.

While Margy continued to sort out the papers on the littered desk, her mind was busy patching together Miss Pepper's disjointed sentences into a coherent whole.

It did not surprise Miss Pepper's secretary to learn that his aunt was worried about her rascally nephew, Rex Pepper. Margy herself had had sufficient dealings with that young man in the past to feel herself fairly well acquainted with his character.

Miss Pepper was rich and Rex Pepper, her one surviving relative, had coveted the wealth that he felt some day would be his own and had tried in every possible way to anticipate his fortune.

In her odd way Miss Pepper had been fond of the young scapegrace, and for a long time had been most generous with him, many times paying the debts that were his constant companions.

But good nature has a limit. When Miss Pepper, in the hope of checking the young rascal's downward course, tightened the purse strings to an uncomfortable degree, Rex Pepper had resorted to other and less savory means of attaining his own ends.

He had come like a thief in the night to his aunt's house, hoping to loot her safe of various valuable contents. On another occasion an attempt to incarcerate his eccentric aunt in an insane asylum had been frustrated by Margy's cleverness.

Finally, Rex Pepper, hovering on the borderline between recklessness and criminality, had taken one step in the wrong direction. By helping to steal a valuable painting and by participating in the abduction of Helen Blythe he had at last put himself within reach of the law.

From Miss Pepper's disjointed sentences Margy surmised that Rex Pepper, like most criminals, objected to paying the penalty for his crime.

What was it Miss Pepper had said? That the young man was going crazy? Was that an actual fact? Margy wondered. Or was Rex Pepper merely playing for sympathy in the hope of thus escaping punishment? Margy could not tell. And neither, apparently, could Miss Pepper.

At this moment, Margy raised her head and

regarded her employer thoughtfully. Miss Pepper met the look.

"He'll get ten years," said the old lady abruptly. "Could interfere and shorten sentence, but won't. Let him take medicine. Through with him, Margy Blythe! Through with him!"

Margy was silent. There seemed nothing to say in reply to this assertion. But Miss Pepper scowled at her fiercely.

"I said, I'm through with him, Margy Blythe," she repeated. "Am I right?"

Before Margy could reply the old lady continued angrily:

"A scoundrel, a thief! Why should I leave him anything when I die? Why should I, I say!"

She shook a packet of papers beneath Margy's nose.

"Look here! These stocks; these mortgages, sound mortgages at six per cent. Set aside for Rex Pepper. Make him rich. Now he gets nothing. I will leave everything to charity, everything, do you hear? Look!"

Abruptly she pushed a picture toward Margy. It was a photograph of a rambling log building. The house stood in the midst of a small clearing. Trees pressed close about it. One could almost hear the murmur of a stream, the song of birds.

"Inviting!" murmured Margy. "It's a camp or lodge of some sort, isn't it?"

"Elk Lodge," Miss Pepper nodded. "Hunting lodge. Been in the family for years. Rex loved it. Told him it would be his some day. Not now! Give it to charity first. Use it for home for blind babies, all I care."

Margy thought a hunting lodge, probably miles from the nearest doctor, an odd asylum for blind babies, but she said nothing. Months in the employ of Miss Pepper had taught her the value of silence.

Miss Pepper fumbled with the loose papers, shuffling them as though they were a pack of cards. She looked up and met Margy's glance again. The girl saw with a shock of surprise that the keen old eyes were dim with unshed tears.

Margy's heart went out to her in instant sympathy. Did the queer old lady care so much for her rascally young nephew, then? Was she really unhappy, regretting the past, dreading the future?

Perhaps Miss Pepper read the sympathy in Margy's glance. At any rate, she turned her face away and began to fuss angrily with the paperweight on her desk.

"He deserves it!" she muttered, as though trying to convince herself, not Margy, that she spoke the truth. "Be a fool to put up with

him. Still—Pepper blood in his veins. Hard to cast off—hard—"

She got up abruptly, the papers clutched tightly in her hand. Margy who, in times gone by, would have thought it incredible that she could ever be sorry for her irascible employer, was sorry for her now. She was even able to see something pathetic in the stiff, erect figure of the old woman as it swept across the room, head defiantly lifted.

"She is unhappy, and desperately afraid some one will find it out," thought Margy.

Miss Pepper fumbled with the door of the safe. It opened grudgingly and the old lady peered inside.

"Oh, my goodness—what— They're gone!" she cried.

Margy jumped to Miss Pepper's side.

"What is it?" she cried. "What is wrong?"

Miss Pepper swayed; put a hand to her forehead.

"I can't believe it!" she cried, and shook off Margy's supporting arm. "Here! Let me look again!"

THE OLD LADY BEGAN A FEVERISH SEARCH OF THE SAFE.

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CHAPTER IV

Theft

While Margy Blythe watched, brows knitted, the old lady began a feverish search of the safe. Family documents were ruthlessly pulled forth and strewed about the room. Every compartment was searched, even that special one the existence of which only Margy and Miss Pepper knew.

At the completion of the search Miss Pepper whirled upon her secretary. Her lips were compressed, her eyes snapped.

"The tin box!" she cried. "What do you know about it, Margy Blythe?"

Margy started.

"I!" she cried and drew herself up so that she looked very straight and tall. "I don't understand what you mean, Miss Pepper!"

"This no time for histrionics!" snapped the old lady. "I ask you again, Margy Blythe. What do you know about tin box?" Miss Pepper's characteristic habit of omitting words she deemed unnecessary could be very irritating at times. This was one of those times!

With an effort Margy controlled her rising indignation. She bit her lip and said quietly:

"I know nothing about a tin box— Wait a minute!" she broke off, as a sudden thought struck her. Miss Pepper watched her keenly.

"There was a tin box," Margy continued excitedly. "I remember noticing it one day when you gave me papers to put in the safe. Was it—did it have a padlock?"

Miss Pepper nodded, her mouth grim.

"It did," she conceded.

"I remember seeing it at the time," Margy continued. "And I pushed it back in the safe to make room for the other papers."

Again Miss Pepper nodded.

"The reason I did not miss it sooner," she said.

There was a moment of thoughtful silence while Miss Pepper regarded the floor and Margy regarded Miss Pepper. Then the old lady looked up and bent a sharp glance upon her secretary.

"When was it you missed box?" she demanded abruptly.

Margy frowned in an effort to concentrate her thoughts.

"I can't tell exactly," she confessed at last. "As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing any tin box in the safe after that first time. I'm afraid," a bit lamely as Miss Pepper's gaze

continued to rest upon her, "that I can't help you very much."

"So it seems!" said Miss Pepper, frowning. "So it seems!"

She was silent for so long that Margy began to think she had said all she intended to on the subject. At last the girl's curiosity and apprehension prompted her to put a tentative question.

"I hope you won't mind my asking, Miss Pepper," she began. "But was there anything of particular value in the tin box?"

"Value!" Miss Pepper glared at her. "About fifty thousand dollars' worth gilt-edged securities!"

Margy gasped.

"So much!" she cried, and added, with a glance at the empty safe: "Do you suppose it has been stolen?"

Miss Pepper glared.

"What else?" she snorted. "The tin box is gone! See that for yourself, Margy Blythe. Securities with it." She paused for a moment, then said slowly, looking at Margy: "There are two people know combination of safe."

"Yes," said Margy steadily. "You know the combination of the safe, Miss Pepper, and so do I. If you mean to suggest—"

The old lady shook her head irritably.

"If you mean, do I think you are thief,

Margy Blythe, answer is no!" she snapped. "Silly to waste time over such an idea! Ridiculous!"

Poor Margy's head was whirling.

"But I thought—" she stammered. "At least—from the way you spoke—"

"Rubbish!" interrupted the extraordinary old lady. "Bosh! Don't be silly!"

Margy subsided. Miss Pepper, she reflected, was a good deal like a mouse trap. You never knew when she was going to spring.

One thing, at least, seemed to be settled. Miss Pepper did not suspect her, Margy Blythe, of stealing the tin box. Then whom did she suspect?

That question was answered almost before it had taken form in Margy's mind.

"My nephew!" said the odd old lady. "Would be willing to wager rest of fortune, Margy Blythe, Rex Pepper knows where tin box is!"

Margy looked thoughtful. She knew that Rex Pepper had been in the habit of entering his aunt's house like a thief in the dead of night. It seemed very probable to her that Miss Pepper's assumption was correct and that on one of these prowling midnight visits young Pepper had opened the library safe and helped himself to the box.

To be sure, the combination of the safe had

been recently changed. But the key to the combination reposed in Miss Pepper's desk, so that the old lady might refresh her memory as often as she found it necessary to do so. Of course, the desk was locked, but to the Rex Peppers of this world a lock is no serious obstacle.

At this point in her reflections Margy nodded and Miss Pepper caught her at it.

"You think so, too, eh?" demanded the latter sharply. "You think my rascally nephew is responsible for the theft? No use to deny it, Margy Blythe. I can see that you do!"

"Yes," said Margy slowly. "I'm sorry to say so, Miss Pepper, but from the way Rex Pepper has acted lately, he would certainly be the first one I should suspect."

Miss Pepper nodded—sadly, Margy thought.

"Yes, yes!" she muttered. "It is altogether likely. Still, should like to believe—"

What her employer would like to believe, Margy was not destined to discover. For Miss Pepper experienced one of her swift changes of mood. She flashed from brooding into sudden anger.

With quick, jerky movements, she thrust the papers back into the safe, slammed the door shut.

"I will have no more sympathy with him!" she cried. "Scoundrel! Cur! Thief! Crazy,

is he? Good for him! Ten years in jail! Good riddance, I say! Mark my words, Margy Blythe!" She whirled upon the girl. "Nephew or no nephew, Rex Pepper will return those papers or I will wring his neck!"

She turned and stalked to the door, mouth set, head erect. At the threshold she paused and looked back at Margy.

"Next week I go South," she announced without preamble. "See that all engagements after Friday this week are canceled."

For a long time after Miss Pepper had gone, Margy sat staring at the spot where she had been.

"*I* am going South," her employer had said. "Not 'we.'"

"Then I am to be left behind," thought Margy, with a dead sinking of the heart. "I wonder if that means that I will lose my job!"

CHAPTER V

A Wish Expressed

It was just two days since Helen Blythe had received the good news about her pictures and Rose the bad news of her temporary lay-off without pay from the Lossar-Martin department store.

It was nearly six o'clock. Savory aromas were wafted from the kitchen where Helen went about the work of getting dinner with a song on her lips. Still Rose lounged, disconsolate in a big chair near the window regarding the not-too-prepossessing outlook as seen from the apartment house.

She had peeled potatoes and shelled peas for Helen and the latter, with her usual cheerful capability had refused further help. Now Rose moped, feeling useless, set aside, out of things generally.

"I almost wish now that I had left Lossar-Martin for good," she thought. "I'd at least have a chance to look about me and try to get another job. It's awful just to hang about and

be a burden on poor Nell. She has worries enough, goodness knows!"

She started as the doorbell peeled sharply.

"Answer it, will you, Posie?" called Helen's voice from the kitchen. "I'm just making the cream sauce and it can't be left at the moment."

Rose heard the clickity-click of the electric connection as Helen pressed the button in the kitchen which would open the door to the entrance of the apartment house. In a moment she rose listlessly and sauntered to the door of the apartment.

Some one was coming up the steps, some one whose very tread on the stairs was familiar.

A head appeared, then a face, then a grin.

"Joe!" cried Rose, jolted from her listlessness. "Are you well enough to be out? Oh, dear, you should never have been allowed to climb all those steps!"

"I'd climb more than these three flights to get to you, Rose," said the "Strainer Man" gallantly. He reached the landing where Rose stood and gripped her hand hard. "My lucky day, finding you at home," he added. "I thought maybe you'd still be at the store."

Rose's face clouded at mention of the store, but she said nothing. With a gay gesture she drew Joe Morris within the hall, turned him about so that she could look at him "on all sides." Joe submitted, his grin growing wider.

"You look as well as ever, Joe." Rose drew a quick breath and her eyes sparkled. "To look at you one would scarcely think you'd been ill."

"Feel great," replied Joe. "Never better in my life. Hello!" as Helen appeared, potato dish in hand. "How's Nell?"

Helen, it appeared, was in excellent health.

"But you, Joe!" she cried delightedly. "I never saw such a change in any one in my life. Are you really as strong as you look?"

"I could lift a piano with one hand tied behind me," Joe boasted. "I'll prove it, if you like."

"Spare the piano," laughed Rose.

Helen led them both kitchenward, declaring that Joe might stay to dinner provided he helped put it on the table.

"No work, no eat," she declared.

Joe accepted the challenge, declaring himself ready for any labor, no matter how arduous.

To the girls, who had seen Joe Morris lying inert and helpless in a hospital bed, who had later heard the doctor's pronouncement that Joe might never walk again, it seemed little short of a miracle to see him thus apparently restored to health, once more his vigorous, virile self.

More than once when she looked at him Rose

felt her eyes fill suddenly with tears and was forced to turn away quickly to hide this emotional evidence from Joe.

Helen was scarcely less moved, and several times in the course of serving the meal found herself doing the most absurd things, such as putting the tea in the sugar bowl and the sugar in the teapot!

They were just sitting down to the table when a key was fitted in the lock and Margy walked in!

Helen and Rose greeted their dark-haired sister with more than usual affection. It was some time since Margy had been able to dine with them, and they felt that this event, combined with the evidence of Joe's recovery, required some sort of celebration.

"We'll get some ice-cream and cake for dessert and have a party," Rose suggested. "It's a long time since we've all been together—like this."

By tacit consent all mention of financial problems and other worries was postponed until later in the evening. Nothing was permitted to spoil that meal, and the young folks enjoyed it down to the last bit of steak and the last crumb of cake.

But over a second cup of tea they began to discuss the future. They could always find so

much to say to each other, these three Blythe sisters, on those rare occasions when they found themselves together in their cozy uptown apartment.

Rose began it with a disconsolate description of her own misfortune at the Lossar-Martin store.

"So you see I'm out," she finished moodily. "For a month, perhaps six weeks, and without a cent of pay. A great help to the family I'm going to be!"

Joe said consolingly:

"Take the vacation and be thankful for it, Rose. Won't do you any harm."

"I wouldn't have cared so much," Rose returned, "if the lay-off had come in summer. But now, in the midst of winter, what is there to do but loaf and hang about the house?"

"I'll show you," Joe promised readily. "I'm willing to bet that, together, we'll not find time hanging heavy on our hands!"

"And during the day," Helen said, with a mischievous smile, "I'll see to it that you don't loaf too much, Posie. You may keep house for a change, while I paint."

This reminded Helen that Margy knew nothing as yet about her new order.

"I'm to paint six pictures," she said gayly. "They are to be winter pictures, designed to

decorate a winter room in a new, gorgeous hotel. Just what do you think of your big sister now?"

"What I always have," said Margy, with a fond glance at the elder girl. "That she is an up-and-coming young artist with a talent amounting to genius. You're bound to succeed in a big way some day, Helen dear. You've already got a firm foothold on the ladder."

Helen flushed with pleasure at this praise. It was sweet to know that her sisters appreciated her art and were aware of the long, hard battle she was waging in the hope of ultimate recognition and a large success.

"I've had a picture in my mind for some time," she said. "To-day I sketched the outlines roughly. Would you like to see it?"

Their answer was so truly enthusiastic that Helen rose, found the sketch, and brought it to them at the table.

Just a few lines sketched roughly on a bit of canvas, yet the girls and Joe know that they were looking upon the foundation of a genuine work of art. A theme, boldly, yet delicately suggested. A snug cabin set in the midst of snow-covered hills, a man struggling through drifts, back bent beneath a weary burden, yet with lifted head and eyes that dwelt eagerly, hungrily, on the windows of the low-roofed home.

"Home!" murmured Margy.

Helen turned to her, shining-eyed.

"Yes!" she breathed. "That's what I mean. And you caught it, Margy?"

"One could scarcely help catching it, Nell," returned Margy, eyes still studying the picture. "What a gift you have! A few strokes of your pencil, and the thought in your mind stands revealed for any one to see."

"There's something behind the windows of that little house," said Rose. Her voice was subdued, her golden head bent low over the picture. "Something that the man with the pack, weary as he is, can't wait to see. What is it, Nell?"

"Warmth, maybe," returned Helen. "A cheery hearth and the homely smell of cooking things—and a girl. Look!" She spread the canvas out before them. There was a catch in her voice, her hands trembled a little in eagerness.

"The roof of the cottage will be red," she continued. "There's the suggestion of warmth, red flame against darkening sky. And bright light streaming from the windows out upon the snow and the man, weary, exhausted straining toward it as though in answer to a spoken word! Have I made you see it?"

"We not only see it, Helen, we *feel* it," said Rose solemnly. "That's the thing about all

your pictures; they do something to you. They make you feel them away down deep inside."

Margy reached for her purse and began to fumble inside it.

She drew forth a photograph and handed it to Helen.

"Another pretty scene, Helen," she said, with a smile.

Helen saw a rambling log house in a clearing, great trees clustered about it.

"What a beautiful place to paint pictures," she cried impulsively. "Oh, if we could only go there!"

CHAPTER VI

Elk Lodge

"Oh, if we could only go there!" repeated Helen Blythe longingly, as she handed the picture of Elk Lodge to Rose.

"Perhaps we can!" Margy heard herself say the words with a sensation of wonder. Whatever had possessed her, she thought, to make such an absurd statement?

Both Helen and Rose took her up instantly.

"But what place is it?" demanded Rose, waving the photograph. "Or is it only a picture and not a real place at all?"

"It's real enough," Margy said. "I borrowed the photograph from Miss Pepper to show Helen. I thought the artist in her would be interested. It's Elk Lodge, situated on Elk Lake—a hunting lodge 'way up in the New England hills."

"Wonderful," murmured Helen, studying the picture. "Imagine owning such a place. I suppose Miss Pepper *does* own it," she added, with a glance at Margy.

"Elk Lodge has been in the Pepper family

for generations," explained the dark-haired girl. "There are traditions about the old place and Miss Pepper loves it. Otherwise, she would probably have sold it long ago. Loads of people have wanted it," she added, with a wise little nod of the head. "But Miss Pepper holds on to it like grim death. You know Miss Pepper. When her mind is made up, it is made up."

"Dynamite couldn't budge her," chuckled Joe. "A strong-minded lady."

"But nice," Margy defended loyally. "She's warm-hearted and loyal to her friends and honest to a fault. I don't see," she added frowning, "how a person of her sort ever happened to be connected with a rogue like Rex Pepper."

Helen and Rose demanded to know at once what had become of Rex Pepper and what his jail sentence was likely to be. This necessitated a recital of the young scoundrel's latest escapade, of the disappearance of valuable stocks and bonds from Miss Pepper's safe and of that lady's unalterable decision to change her will and cut Rex off without a penny.

"A good thing too," said Rose. "After what happened to Helen last year, I'd say that nothing was too bad for Miss Pepper's nephew."

"I wonder if he really is going crazy," mur-

mured Helen. "That would be a horrible enough punishment for the worst crime. I'm really sorry to hear it."

Margy shrugged.

"Miss Pepper thinks he may be play-acting in the hope of rousing her sympathy or perhaps shortening his jail sentence—if he gets one."

Helen still held the photograph of Elk Lodge in her hand. Now she reverted to Margy's odd statement concerning it.

"What did you mean," she demanded, "by saying that we might be able to go to Elk Lodge?"

Margy looked sheepish.

"Not a thing in the world," she admitted. "I don't know what made me say such a thing, except an instinctive desire to give you what you want, Helen."

"Is the lodge occupied now?" Rose asked.

"I think not," said Margy doubtfully. "Although I know Miss Pepper occasionally permits friends to use it during the winter months."

"Well, *you're* a friend, aren't you?" suggested Rose daringly. "Ask her to lend it to you for a while, Margy, there's a dear!"

Margy looked rueful.

"In the first place, I'm not a friend, I'm a secretary," she said. "In the second place,

I'm not sure I'll be even her secretary very long."

Margy had not meant to say that. With Rose temporarily out of a job, there was enough to disturb the girls, she thought, without adding her own worries and perplexities.

However, now it was out and nothing remained but to make a clean breast of the whole story.

Her sisters were sympathetic as always and tried their best to be encouraging.

"Maybe Miss Pepper intends to take you South with her," Rose suggested.

But Margy's only answer to this was a doleful shake of the head.

"I happen to know that that is *not* her intention," she said. "There are four of them traveling together—Florida is their objective, you know—and they will need only one secretary among them. That secretary is not Miss Margy Blythe."

"Oh!" Rose exclaimed. "Then Miss Pepper has really discharged you?"

"She has done no such thing!" said Margy shortly. "But I expect that she will any day. And while the situation remains in that state," she added, with a wry smile, "you can easily see that I cannot very well ask my employer for the loan of Elk Lodge!"

Meanwhile, the packing for Florida con-

tinued. Miss Pepper was very busy putting her affairs in shape. She was often irritable and snappish with Margy. As time passed and the day of departure approached, the youthful secretary became increasingly glum and disheartened.

If Miss Pepper noticed Margy's mood, which was far from probable, she certianly did nothing to brighten it. Not a word did she say about the girl's future prospects; nor did she appear to notice how silent and abstracted Margy became as the days passed by.

"Discharging me is all in the day's work, it seems," thought the girl, resentfully. "Too many club luncheons and silly lectures to worry about Margy Blythe!"

During this time a young man by the name of Dale Elton called up the Pepper mansion almost daily, asking for Miss Pepper's secretary. But though this same Dale Elton made repeated and tempting offers of amusement and recreation, Margy refused them all with a curtness that would have discouraged a less persistent young journalist.

But Dale was one of those rare persons who will not be discouraged. After a while one stops trying through sheer weariness.

"I'm not in the mood, Dale," Margy said at perhaps the sixtieth telephone conversation. "I'm dancing on the edge of a precipice."

"I know a better place to dance than that," came hopefully from Dale.

"I'm serious, Dale!"

"So am I! I wish you could see me, corners of my mouth drawn permanently into the form of a capsized U—"

"Oh, you are absolutely hopeless! I've work to do, Dale! Good-by!"

"Good-by till the next time," warned Dale, and stared ruefully at the 'phone as a sharp click sounded in his ear.

And another time—the very day, as it happened, before Miss Pepper was scheduled to leave for Florida—

"If you call me again, Dale Elton, I'll scream—"

"Fine! Then I can call a doctor, anyway. A ride with you in an ambulance would be better than nothing!"

Now what could one do with a person like that? Margy was free to confess that she did not know. One could ring off, of course; but there was nothing to prevent his calling again, and again and again—

Margy hung up the receiver with a reluctant smile.

"Persistency like that deserves to win," she murmured. "After to-morrow, I probably won't have the strength to refuse him!"

Her heart leaped painfully as she heard Miss

Pepper's step in the upper hall. With every appearance of her employer Margy expected to hear the dreaded words that would rob her of employment. There were other situations to be had, of course, but she had been very happy with Miss Pepper.

Now she slipped into the library and sat down before the orderly desk. All last-minute matters had been attended to. The usual friendly litter of papers was gone.

Margy wanted to cry. It was as though some one she knew and loved had died suddenly and she had only just that moment heard of it!

She sat with downcast eyes, listening to Miss Pepper's footsteps, hoping they would pass on toward the front door.

"If it's bad news, I don't want to hear it yet," she told herself stubbornly.

But Miss Pepper's quick, staccato steps halted directly before the library door. She was coming in!

"It's all over," thought Margy forlornly. "If I were going to die on the gallows, I'd not feel a bit worse!"

CHAPTER VII

A Pleasant Surprise

Miss Pepper came swiftly across the room. She sat down at the desk and Margy, as usual, took a chair beside it.

Miss Pepper looked about her, sharp eyes taking in the spotless order of the desk.

"Everything cleared up?" she stated rather than asked.

Margy nodded.

"Unless you have other papers for me," she suggested tentatively.

"No!"

Miss Pepper's glance wandered about the library, then rested for a moment on Margy's face.

"What's matter?" she demanded sharply. "You look ill, child!"

"No!" said Margy, biting her lip to steady it. "I am perfectly well, Miss Pepper."

"Then why not look it?" snapped the old lady crossly. "Dark rings under eyes. Staying up late nights?" she queried suddenly.

Margy shook her head. She remembered

Dale Elton and his invitations and even smiled a little ruefully.

"No, I get to bed quite early," she said.

"Humph!" said Miss Pepper incredulously. "Then don't eat enough!"

She glared so hard at Margy that the poor girl scarcely knew whether to laugh or weep. She pulled herself together and said in as near her ordinary manner as she could summon:

"Indeed, there is nothing wrong with me, Miss Pepper. I feel quite well."

"Humph!" said the old lady. It was evident that she was not in the least convinced. However, she removed her accusing stare from poor Margy's face—a concession for which the girl was profoundly thankful—and, opening a drawer in the desk, began to rummage in it.

She drew forth a check book and began to scribble industriously in it.

"Some charity she has forgotten until the last minute," thought Margy, without interest.

Miss Pepper added her signature to the check and stared at it for a moment, frowning. Then she glanced up at Margy.

"Expect to be gone only two months," she said abruptly. "May be longer. Here!" she handed the check to Margy.

The girl accepted it, still convinced that it had been made out to some charitable organization.

A careless glance, a start and a closer inspection.

"Why," said Margy in an odd tone, "this is made out to me!"

"Why not?" retorted Miss Pepper sharply.

"But," faltered Margy, "I—don't understand. This is a check made out to me for two months' salary in advance!"

Miss Pepper looked puzzled.

"Well, why not?" she snapped. "What's matter, girl? Taken leave of senses?"

Margy shook her head as though to clear her befuddled brain. A light was slowly beginning to dawn.

"Then," she said slowly, looking at Miss Pepper, "you expect to keep me in your employ?"

Miss Pepper's annoyance appeared to be steadily mounting.

"Why not?" she exploded. "Best secretary ever had! Discharge Margy Blythe? Nonsense!"

She rose abruptly and started toward the door; then, as abruptly, came back and sat down again. She regarded Margy closely.

"If that is not enough," she said, with a gesture toward the check Margy still held, "let me know. Will send more!"

Knowing that her eccentric employer detested above all other things a public display

of emotion, Margy strove to temper her gratitude as she said quietly:

"You are very good to me, Miss Pepper. This check will be more than enough for my needs while you are away."

"Good!" said the old lady.

She got up and started for the door, then came back and sat down again. Margy wished she wouldn't. The old lady reminded her, absurdly, of a jack-in-the-box whose cover would not stay down.

"You look tired," said Miss Pepper. "While I am away you should have vacation. Go away somewhere!"

The suggestion savored of command. Into Margy's mind flashed an inspiration.

"Elk Lake!" she thought. "Now is my chance!"

"It is very kind of you to think of me, Miss Pepper," she said hesitantly, "especially when you have so many more important things to think of—"

"Don't be modest!" snapped the old lady. "Hate modesty! Hypocritical nonsense!"

Hardly an auspicious beginning, especially as Miss Pepper drew forth an enormous gold watch and glanced at it impatiently.

"Four o'clock," she muttered. "Have engagement. Must go!"

Left to herself, Margy would have let the

matter drop. But there was Helen to consider. Helen had wanted Elk Lodge and Helen should have it, if it lay within Margy Blythe's power to give it to her!

So she said hurriedly, blurting out the question before she could change her mind:

"Miss Pepper, I wonder if I might ask a great favor of you. The other day," she hastened on as Miss Pepper shot her a sharp glance, "you showed me a picture, if you remember, of Elk Lodge."

"Yes! Yes," muttered the old lady, with another glance at her watch. "What of it?"

Nothing could have been more discouraging. Thinking of Helen, Margy gasped and took the plunge.

"When you spoke just now of my taking a vacation I thought at once of Elk Lodge and of how wonderful it would be to go up there for a few weeks. I love skating and skiing and all the rest of it," she blundered on, not daring to raise her eyes to Miss Pepper's face. "Of course I know I'm—taking a great liberty in even asking it—"

"Rubbish!" cried Miss Pepper.

Margy's heart leaped. She knew what it meant when her employer took that tone. Elk Lodge was as good as an accomplished fact.

"Of course, use it!" continued Miss Pepper. "No one up there. Might as well be occupied

as empty. Best place in world for vacation. Like to be going there self."

Margy's eyes were bright as they met the keen old glance of Dorcas Pepper.

"You're so *good!*" she cried. Nothing on earth could have checked that impulse of sincere gratitude.

"Rubbish! Stuff and nonsense!" But the lines of the shrewd old face suddenly softened, became, for the moment, almost gentle. "Ridiculous child! It will cost me nothing!"

"But even if it did cost you something," said Margy, smiling, "you would do it just the same."

"Stuff!" said the old lady irritably. "Nonsense! I say it will cost me nothing."

There ensued a few moments of thoughtful silence on the part of Miss Pepper. Then she said, frowning:

"What has become of those pretty sisters of yours?" Without waiting for an answer she added abruptly: "Take them to Elk Lodge with you. Be good company. Wait a minute!"

Margy watched her, puzzled, while Miss Pepper drew forth a piece of paper and scribbled something hastily upon it.

"There!" said Miss Pepper. She handed the folded bit of notepaper to Margy. "Hunt up Hannah Lockley, give her note from me. Old woman lives at Hammerport, end of Elk Lake.

Good cook. Take her to lodge with you."

She rose abruptly as though to put a definite end to the interview. Margy half expected to see her sit down again. But this time she marched swiftly to the doorway, stopping at the threshold for one last word.

"Get supplies in Hammerport," she directed. "Charge everything to me. Have good time, Margy Blythe."

But Margy Blythe, shrewd, efficient young business woman that she was, found herself suddenly overwhelmed by a flood of grateful emotion. She ran across the room, caught Miss Pepper's thin old hand in hers and pressed it to her cheek.

"I know how you hate thanks," she cried impulsively. "But I don't care. I'm going to thank you, anyway. Thank you! There! Thank you! *Thank* you!"

"Stuff!" cried Miss Pepper, hastily withdrawing her hand. "Whoever heard such nonsense!" But the look on Miss Dorcas Pepper's face as she turned away was most decidedly not one of anger!

CHAPTER VIII

Joe Makes a Suggestion

Margy Blythe could not wait to get to Helen with her news. If it had been possible she would have run up home on the very day that she received permission from Miss Pepper to use Elk Lodge. However, since Miss Pepper was to leave for Florida the following day it was not only Margy's duty, but the part of good manners as well, to remain at the Pepper mansion until her employer had definitely departed for points South.

The hours in between stretched interminably. She thought of telephoning, but decided that would be an unsatisfactory way of imparting her great news.

"I'll wait," she decided. "And while I'm waiting I might as well do some packing on my own account. *What* a wonderful vacation we are all going to have!"

Margy's gratitude prompted a constant attendance upon Miss Pepper up to the time set for her departure. Margy even accompanied

her as far as the railway station, where her employer was met by the rest of her party.

Here Margy met the secretary who was to take notes for four cantankerous old ladies during an indefinite Southern trip. Suffice it to say that Margy Blythe did not envy that secretary.

Miss Pepper was safely aboard the train at last. With a last wave of the hand, Margy turned away. She was conscious of a curiously empty feeling. Miss Pepper and her affairs so filled Margy's world that their sudden removal was a distinct shock.

Not for long, however. Almost immediately the reaction set in. With a growing sense of elation, Margy moved on down the platform. Nothing, she remembered, now stood between her and the revealing of her great news.

Nothing? A moment later Margy had cause to revise that assertion. A tall figure suddenly blocked her path. A familiar voice said with dramatic emphasis:

"Aha! Margy Blythe! You shall not again evade me!"

Dale Elton of course! Margy looked at him, half-laughing, half-resentful.

"Why do you keep popping up?" she queried, as Dale familiarly hooked an arm within hers. "One never knows at what odd corner she may run into you!"

"It is the business of a rising young journalist to 'keep popping up' as you describe it," returned Dale cheerfully. "And as for corners, the odder they are, the better for business."

Margy tried in vain to release her arm.

"Please, Dale," she begged, "won't you run along? I've important business on hand."

"So have I," returned Dale cheerfully.

"Then please attend to it!" cried Margy, exasperated.

"I am!"

Margy stopped short and firmly detached her arm from the grasp of the persistent young journalist.

"Dale," she almost pleaded, "you must have something to do more important than trailing me all over town."

"Nothing half so pleasant!" retorted Dale, with a grin. However, Margy noticed that he glanced a bit anxiously at his watch. "Your eagerness to be rid of me is unflattering, to say the least of it, Margy Blythe. However, I should be used to such treatment by this time," with a sigh of resignation. "The hardest heart in Harlem! How's that for a headline?" he grinned.

In spite of herself, Margy chuckled.

"All right except that my heart is soft and I don't live in Harlem. But do run along, Dale—"

"On one condition only—"

"Come up to the apartment to-night," said Margy hastily; then relented enough to add as she turned away: "I shouldn't wonder if we would have news for you!"

All the way up in the subway Margy reveled in the thought of Helen's surprise and delight when she heard the great news.

"Nice for Rose, too," she thought. "It will do her good to get away and forget all about Lossar-Martin for a little while."

Emerging into the cold outer air at the end of the long subway ride Margy shivered and drew her coat closer about her.

"Getting colder," she thought, and glanced up at the leaden sky. "Shouldn't wonder a bit if we had a snowstorm before long."

She thought of Elk Lake in a snowstorm and her pulses leaped.

Helen was at home, working hard on her sketch. Rose, Margy learned upon greeting her sister, had gone out to market.

"Such a dear little housewife," Helen laughed. "She won't let me do a bit of housework, bless her heart. I'm getting quite spoiled."

"How's the picture?" Margy asked, going over to the canvas.

A swift shadow erased Helen's smile.

"Not so good," she confessed. "The idea

is there; but the inspiration is lacking. I can't seem to finish it, Margy."

The dark-haired girl studied the picture thoughtfully for a moment.

"It looks good to me," she remarked. "But then I don't pretend to be an artist. What's wrong, Nell?"

Helen frowned.

"I don't exactly know," she confessed. "Unless," hesitantly, "it's the atmosphere. Here I feel crowded, cramped. What I really need is a change of scene, I suppose. To get out in the open with space about me—" She paused and glanced half-apologetically at her sister.

"Of course that's out of the question—just now," she said, smiling with an effort.

Margy put an arm about her sister.

"What would you say," she asked slowly, "if I were to tell you that it is not out of the question at all; that you have only to wish to have the wish come true?"

Helen turned to her sister, her blue eyes suddenly dark with excitement.

"You have something nice to say to me, Margy Blythe!" she cried. "What is it?"

Margy drew her over to the couch and told her of that last interview with Miss Pepper.

"So you see we have Elk Lodge for as long as we care to use it," she finished triumphantly.

"Will your inspiration come back to you there, Nell, do you think?"

"Will it!" cried Helen, eyes shining. "I'll paint such pictures as I have never painted before. You watch and see, Margy Blythe!"

That evening the girls had an impromptu party by way of celebration.

Hugh Draper came up from the apartment on the ground floor, bringing with him a dozen or so lemons and a bottle of cherries.

"For punch," the young lawyer explained. "Give me an apron, Helen, and set me to work!"

Dale Elton arrived, late because of an unexpected assignment.

"Wished on me at the last minute," he told them. "I was lucky to get away at all."

Last came Joe Morris. Since he brought with him the ice-cream, he found himself at once, and deservedly, popular.

The boys were greatly interested in the proposed trip to Elk Lake.

"Sounds pretty soft to me," said Joe enviously. "All you girls taking a vacation in the midst of winter and getting paid for it in the bargain. Pret-ty soft!"

"*I'm* not getting paid for it," said Rose mournfully. "Little Margy is the lucky one."

"But don't forget that we are to have all our living free," Margy reminded her. "Miss Pep-

per told us to get in all the supplies we needed from Hammerport and charge them to her. She had no idea of the appetites we girls have when on a vacation," she added, with a chuckle. "Otherwise she might not have made such a reckless promise."

It was later on in the evening that Joe made his suggestion.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," he said. "Let's *all* go up to Hammerport! We could take one of the company's big open motor trucks and make a picnic party of it."

"The man's mad," gibed Rose. "Imagine staging a winter picnic party!"

"It would be all right if we wore plenty of clothes," Joe insisted. "I don't mean that we'd eat our meals by the roadside, or anything like that," he added, as the girls still looked incredulous. "There must be plenty of inns and farmhouses on the way where we could get our chow."

"But Hammerport is three hundred and forty miles up in the New England hills," Margy protested. "It would take days to make the trip."

"Only two or three," returned Joe. "And I imagine we fellows could get a little time off if we tried hard. Anyway, think it over," he added. "We don't have to decide anything right away. Only, if the answer is 'yes' give

me a day or two to get one of the light trucks ready for the trip."

Just two days later Rose called up the "Strainer Man" to tell him that she and her sisters would go to Hammerport in his truck if his proposition was still open to them.

"Whoopee!" cried Joe at his end of the wire. "When do we start? To-morrow?"

"The day after," said Rose. "That is, if you boys can get ready by then. Margy says to tell you that we are all packed up and rarin' to go!"

At last everything was arranged. Dale had arranged for a leave of absence. "One of the scrubs can take on my job for the few days I'll be gone," he explained. "I'm so important on my paper they will never miss me!"

Hugh Draper's most recent case had been held up by the mystifying absence of the state's chief witness.

"If I stayed here I'd merely be hanging about the courts biting my fingernails," he said.

"I know a trick worth two of that!" Rose teased him.

"And I!" agreed Hugh, with a smile.

As for Joe, he had two or three weeks more of vacation before entering upon his old job with the moving company.

"Nothing could be sweeter," said Joe. "The

old motor truck is in fine shape. At nine o'clock sharp to-morrow morning she will be parked before your door!"

However, at exactly a quarter to nine the following morning the telephone in the Blythe apartment rang out a sharp summons. Margy was the first to reach it.

"Hello," she cried impatiently. "Yes this is—why, Miss P-Pepper! But it can't be you! Why—you are in Florida!"

CHAPTER IX

Rex Escapes

Miss Dorcas Pepper was not in Florida. It took only a few moments of caustic telephone conversation to convince Margy of that.

"Home again—Riverside Drive house," Miss Pepper said briefly. "Trouble. Must see you at once."

Margy heard the click at the other end of the wire that told its own story. Miss Pepper had hung up.

Margy turned a face of tragedy to the expectant girls.

"Miss Pepper is home again!" she announced. "Don't ask me why! Who ever knows why Miss Pepper does things?"

"Oh, dear! Our trip will be spoiled!" cried Rose. "Margy," as the dark-haired girl flew past her, "where are you going?"

"To put on my hat," retorted Margy. "Miss Pepper wants to see me at once. Gracious! What did I do with my coat?"

Helen found the coat and patiently helped Margy into it.

"Don't worry, dear," she said. "This may not mean that we will have to give up our trip. We may only have to postpone it for a day or two."

"No such luck," returned Margy gloomily. "Just now I'm prepared to think the worst!" Margy vanished, leaving consternation and sick disappointment behind her.

At the Pepper mansion she found her employer awaiting her in the library. The former held a slip of paper in her hands and was examining it intently when Margy's whirlwind entrance caused her to look up.

"Miss Pepper!" cried Margy, going up to her at once. "I supposed you were in Florida by this time. Has anything serious happened?"

"Should say so," snapped the old lady. "Sit down, Margy Blythe. You fidget me!"

With an effort, Margy controlled her impatience. She sat down on the edge of the chair and regarded Miss Pepper intently.

For some time the old lady examined the slip of paper in her hand, frowning. Then she glanced up, caught Margy's look, and scowled more darkly.

"Been to see Rex Pepper," she snapped. "In jail."

"When?" asked Margy.

Miss Pepper disliked being interrupted. She glared.

"Day before yesterday," she snapped and added, forestalling further questions: "Started for Florida, all right. You saw me on train. Then got to thinking about tin box and stolen bonds. Detectives I hired failed to turn up a clue to thief. I thought I would see Rex Pepper again and demand to know truth."

Miss Pepper lapsed into a brooding silence and Margy regarded her thoughtfully.

"So you left your friends," said the girl, "and took the next train back to New York." After a moment she added, "And did you see Rex, Miss Pepper?"

"Saw him twice," said the old lady. "First time denied all knowledge of bonds. Second time admitted taking tin box."

Margy leaned forward eagerly.

"He did?" she cried.

Miss Pepper nodded briefly.

"Admitted taking it! Said he had hidden it some distance from New York." The old lady spoke angrily, clenching her hands. "He is worse than I thought him," she burst out. "Pretended penitence while all the time he was laughing at me, the young scoundrel!"

Margy asked eagerly:

"Did he tell you where he hid the box?"

Miss Pepper glared at her.

"Told me he would take me there!" she spluttered. "A detective went with us."

Margy was sitting on the very edge of her chair now, eyes fixed eagerly upon Miss Pepper's face. She could sense drama, even in the old lady's jerky incoherent recital of events.

"We rode for long way," continued Miss Pepper. "Then got out at tumbledown station and walked for miles along lonely road. At last came to old house—" At this point the old lady's voice shook so with repressed rage that she was forced to pause for a moment and control herself before continuing with her story.

Margy waited patiently. It occurred to her that Rose and Helen were also waiting and perhaps not quite so patiently. With an effort she thrust the thought from her.

"We went in the old house," continued Miss Pepper. "Rex said tin box was in cellar. Ran downstairs, detective at his heels. Suddenly—poof—disappeared—vanished—not sign of him left."

Margy felt suddenly limp. The strain of trying to understand her erratic employer was beginning to tell on her. One thing only stood out clearly in her mind. Rex Pepper had escaped!

"It seems odd," she said at last, "that he could disappear so quickly and no trace of him be found. I suppose no trace of him *has* been found?" she added, as an afterthought.

"No," said Miss Pepper shortly. "The de-

tective searched everywhere, called in help of local police. No good. Rex Pepper has disappeared."

"Probably had some hiding place in or about the old house," mused Margy. "I suppose the police are still looking for him?" she added, after a moment."

"Humph!" snorted Miss Pepper. "That's all they do do—look. Mark my words, Margy Blythe. They'll not find Rex Pepper in a hurry."

She fell into a moody silence, folding and refolding the slip of paper in her hand.

Margy waited, wondering why Miss Pepper had seen fit to send for her. Had the old lady merely wished to unburden her mind concerning her rascally nephew? Knowing Miss Pepper, this seemed very unlikely to Margy. Then what had been her motive?

Miss Pepper answered the question as though it had been spoken aloud. Without speaking she extended the slip of paper.

Margy examined it curiously. She saw only a row of numbers, quite evidently a safe combination.

"This is not the combination of your safe, Miss Pepper," she said, puzzled.

Miss Pepper lowered her voice and glanced over her shoulder as though she half expected to see Rex Pepper leering close to her.

"New combination to old safe," she said brusquely. "Had lock changed again."

Margy nodded. She knew now that her employer really feared Rex Pepper and the possibility of further depredations by him. A wave of pity for the grim old lady swept her.

"I understand," she said. "You wish me to know the combination, too?"

"You must memorize it," said Miss Pepper briskly. "And when you have done so we will destroy the slip of paper."

Margy obediently fixed the numbers in her mind. She then tried the safe several times until she could open it to her satisfaction. Then, with an eloquent gesture, she handed the slip of paper to Miss Pepper.

"I don't think I will forget," she said simply.

With her lips grimly set, Miss Pepper tore the paper into tiny fragments, then carefully grouped them together and placed them in the grate, where she put a match to them.

A light grew in her eyes as she saw the thin ribbon of smoke curl up the chimney.

"There, Rex Pepper!" she muttered. "Next time you try to open safe you will need dynamite!"

The little ceremony at an end, Miss Pepper glanced sharply at Margy and strode to the door. Margy followed uncertainly.

"You are going away again, Miss Pepper?" she asked.

"To Florida," snapped the old lady. "I will get there this time."

She marched upstairs like a soldier on parade. A few moments later Margy saw her come down again, hatted and cloaked. Without pausing at the library door she walked from the house, down the steps, and into the waiting limousine.

Margy waited until the car had turned the corner and was out of sight before she herself left the house. A glance at her watch told her that she had been with Miss Pepper just an hour and fifty minutes.

"We can still start for the lodge to-day," she thought. "The girls needn't be disappointed, after all."

Hard on the heels of this thought came another.

"Rex Pepper is free—a desperate criminal now and going mad. I wish that he were still in jail!"

CHAPTER X

Apprehension

Margy Blythe found the boys and girls anxiously awaiting her. The motor truck was before the door and already it had collected its quota of curious small boys.

The young people were above stairs in the apartment. They greeted Margy eagerly, demanding to know her news.

"Has Miss Pepper come back to stay? Is the trip off?" asked Rose.

In as few words as possible Margy explained the reason for her employer's sudden reappearance. The girls—and the boys too—became very thoughtful over the news of Rex Pepper's escape.

"I'm sorry to hear that that skunk is at liberty again," Hugh said. "A confirmed trouble-maker of his type should be shut up where he can't do any harm."

"Well, he probably won't make any trouble for *us*," said the practical Margy. "And now —what do you say to getting started?"

The suggestion met with unanimous agree-

ment. Joe was as eager as a small boy to show off his truck and to exhibit the changes he had made in it, changes intended to add a great deal to the comfort of his passengers.

Loaded with grips and various-sized bundles containing blankets and such necessaries, the young folks filed out of the apartment.

Outside they found that the group of small boys about the truck had grown to a mob. Through this they thrust their way, exchanging gay jests with the youngsters and feeling, for the moment, as young and irresponsible as any of them.

Inside the truck, Joe had built two long benches, and these benches were covered with aged but comfortable leather cushions. There were two army blankets for warmth.

The girls chuckled appreciatively as they noted these preparations for the long trip.

"All the comforts of home," laughed Helen. "You pamper us, Joe. I thought this was to be a rough-and-tumble gypsy expedition. Instead, you offer us the luxury of a parlor car!"

"Isn't it cute!" cried Rose, peeping inside. "All we need are a few windows with curtains to them to make a real house out of it!"

The boys piled grips and bundles within the truck, packing them expertly so as to get the greatest amount in the smallest space.

At the last moment, just when they thought

that everything was ready for the start, Mrs. Draper came out to them carrying a big hamper of lunch.

The girls were very fond of Hugh's mother. On more than one occasion they had had cause to be grateful to her for some small act of friendship. Now they greeted her affectionately.

"Just a few stuffed eggs and sandwiches," said Mrs. Draper, smiling. "It was hard to think of you children starting off on a long trip with nothing to eat in the truck with you. So I brought you a little lunch to remember me by."

The girls stowed the hamper away, thanked Mrs. Draper, and then, at Joe's insistence, climbed aboard the truck.

"We'll have to burn up the road a bit to make up for lost time," said the Strainer Man. "I say!" as Rose started to climb into the rear of the truck with the others, "I thought you were going to sit up front with me, Rose."

"All right," agreed the girl. She scrambled over the back of the seat and settled herself comfortably beside Joe. The latter drew a blanket from somewhere beneath the seat and tucked it about her knees.

"You won't be cold out here, will you?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm as warmly dressed as an Eskimo,"

Rose returned. "I couldn't feel cold if I tried."

Dale and Hugh tightened the ropes that bound the luggage, then signaled to Joe that all was in readiness.

"Off we go!" said the latter, and threw in the clutch.

Mrs. Draper waved to them from the sidewalk as they trundled slowly down the street. The crowd of small boys followed for a considerable distance, cheering and yelling.

Joe turned a corner and the truck gathered speed. Mrs. Draper was left behind. The gleeful children were out-distanced and fell back to find some new attraction. At last the girls and boys were started on the first leg of their journey to Elk Lodge.

Hugh asked to hear more about Rex Pepper.

Again Margy repeated the story she had heard from Miss Pepper, this time giving full details. Hugh and Dale evinced great interest and more than a little apprehension.

"If I were going to be in town for the next few days I'd amuse myself by doing a little detective work. I bet I'd soon smoke out that rat!" said Dale disgustedly.

"Miss Pepper would be grateful to you," observed Margy. "Especially if you could make him give back her tin box full of bonds!"

Helen had been busy with her thoughts for some minutes. Now she said abruptly:

"It seems to me that you told us once that Elk Lodge belonged to Rex Pepper."

"No," Margy corrected. "What I said was that Miss Pepper had intended to leave the lodge to Rex. He was very fond of it and often entertained hunting parties out there in the old days. I judged, from what Miss Pepper said, that he understood that the lodge would belong to him some day. Probably he feels that it belongs to him already."

As she spoke an unpleasant thought crossed her mind. What would Rex Pepper think, what would he do, should he learn that the Blythe sisters were on their way to Elk Lodge, a place which he undoubtedly regarded as his personal property?

"Rex Pepper has no reason to love any of us," she said slowly. "He hates me, especially, because I have been able more than once to spoil his little schemes. I imagine," with a wry smile, "that he would give quite a good deal to get even with Margy Blythe!"

"It isn't a pleasant thought," Dale agreed, frowning. "The lodge is undoubtedly a lonesome place, probably miles away from everybody. I don't like the idea of you girls living there all alone—as long as Rex Pepper is at large."

"As long as he isn't 'at lodge' it will be all right," chuckled Margy. "No, no, Dale. We

are not going to give up our plans now, not for a dozen Rex Peppers!"

Nevertheless, they all remained thoughtful for a considerable period. It seemed to them particularly unfortunate that Miss Pepper's scoundrelly young nephew should have made his escape just at this time. And it was a peculiar coincidence that they should be bound for a spot which Rex Pepper regarded as his own particular stamping ground.

Still, the girls, if not the boys, agreed that it was too late now to think of retreat.

They found the motor truck amazingly comfortable. Because of the generous lunch Mrs. Draper had put up for them, they found it possible to travel for the remainder of that day without pause. When they did stop for the night, Joe pronounced himself well satisfied with the progress they had made.

"We have made up for our late start and a little bit more," he said. "To-morrow the old truck will have a chance to prove whether or not it can climb hills."

They had turned in at a lighted building that bore all the outward evidences of a roadside inn. As they climbed wearily from the truck, their ears were greeted by the unmistakable, though muffled, sound of jazz music played expertly by some hidden band or orchestra.

Rose brightened.

"I do believe they have dancing here," she said.

"Sounds like it," Joe agreed. "Let's have a look!"

The travelers were greeted at the door by a debonair old gentleman who immediately put his hostelry and all it contained at their service.

The girls and boys were delighted with the accommodations. They chose two large rooms on the second floor. To these their hand luggage was brought at once.

"This is what I'd call real accommodations," said Rose happily. "What shall we do, girls? Change our clothes or just freshen up and go down to dinner the way we are?"

At the moment there came a tap at their door. Joe was outside.

"There *is* dancing," he announced. "And a good dance floor! Hurry down and we'll try a round or two."

"There's your answer, Posie," laughed Helen. "I guess there's no help for it. We'll have to pretty ourselves now!"

CHAPTER XI

A Dance

What a difference a change of clothes can make! The girls had entered the hotel looking weary and travel-stained. A short half hour later they emerged from their room to greet the boys looking as fresh as the morning, and as sweet.

They had exchanged dark street dresses for soft-colored silks, faces shone from contact with cold water; hair emerged, sleek and gleaming from the vigorous application of a hair brush.

No wonder the boys were proud to take them down to the dining room. Small wonder, either, that many heads were turned to watch them as they passed.

The dining room, when they located it, seemed more like an apartment in one of the large hotels than the dining room of a country inn. The people gathered there for dinner and dancing were the kind one might expect to meet in any metropolis.

"It's good we brought along some decent clothes," Margy remarked to Helen.

Rose giggled.

"We hardly expected to dine at the Ritz, either," she said.

The tables were set about a space cleared for dancing, and while the boys ordered food the girls amused themselves by studying the people about them.

"This must be a fairly famous place, judging from the look of it," said Margy. "People probably come from considerable distances for the privilege of eating and dancing here."

"Judging from the line of cars outside, I'd say you were right," agreed Helen. "We were lucky to stumble upon a place of this sort."

"And what an orchestra!" exclaimed Rose, her feet keeping time beneath the table. "I don't want to eat. I'd much rather dance."

"Come along then," said Joe. He rose, pushing back his chair. "Might as well dance till the food gets here, anyway."

Rose joined him eagerly and they swung out upon the dance floor. Joe was an exceptionally good dancer and Rose was as light as a feather in his arms.

"Joe seems as well as ever," Dale remarked. "There was a time," he added, "when I thought the poor chap would never walk again—let alone dance."

"He had a wonderful constitution to fight for him," said Hugh.

"And a lot of grit," added Helen.

Joe and Rose had set the ball rolling. Hugh and Helen, Dale and Margy soon followed them out on the floor. They danced until the food was set on the table, they danced between courses and before dessert. The girls would have continued dancing even after that if Joe had not put his foot down and commanded bed.

"We can't hope to make an early start tomorrow morning if we dance all night," he pointed out. "And we've a long distance to travel, you know."

The girls reluctantly agreed that this was wisdom.

"Though as far as I'm concerned, I could cheerfully stay here for a week," said Rose. "It's a wonderful place."

"Nevertheless, we must be traveling," said Joe inexorably.

The next day dawned gloomily enough. A chill wind whistled about the house, an ominous bank of grey clouds promised snow.

Small wonder that the girls were reluctant to leave the cheerful warmth of the Inn for the chill discomfort of outdoors. Joe still urged an early start, however, so they bundled themselves in sweaters and heavy coats and obediently filed out to the reladen truck.

They had gone only a few miles before they realized the truth of Joe's prediction that today would test the hill-climbing ability of the auto truck. The road was rough and filled with many obstacles; sometimes it was so steep that the truck groaned and grumbled laboriously in the effort to make the grade.

At noon they stopped at a farmhouse where they succeeded in procuring a plentiful luncheon of ham and eggs, cream and apple pie.

"Not so bad," said Hugh, as they climbed into the truck again. "A fellow could go a long way on worse fare than that."

"Luck has been with us so far," Dale agreed. "Let's hope it continues."

Toward evening the promise of the grey cloudbank was fulfilled. Snow began to fall gently, in large flakes, settling upon the ground with the softness of a caress.

"Nothing to worry about yet," remarked Joe. "Melts as soon as it touches the ground. This is only a fake snowstorm."

"Looks like the promise of plenty to come, just the same," remarked Rose. "I shouldn't wonder if we'd see plenty of it in the near future."

"May be heavy snowfalls up in the hills," Hugh agreed. "New England usually gets her share."

"Can't be too much for me," said Helen

gayly. "My pictures call for snow, you know."

"If you get snowbound," Dale promised, "we'll come and dig you out!"

It was not long before the snow stopped. The leaden sky cleared and the sun came out.

"I told you it was all a fake," laughed Joe. "I prophesy that from now on we have nothing but good weather!"

The next day was to prove Joe a very poor weather prophet indeed. After a second night with accommodations much inferior to those they had found at the Inn, the young folks started out bright and early, encouraged by the fact that they were now on the last lap of their journey.

It was not long, however, before they ran, head first, into a snowstorm—a genuine one, this time. The snow fell steadily, heavily, until the ground was covered and white. The road still wound uphill and there were times when the wheels of the truck slithered and skidded alarmingly, almost refusing the grade.

"I guess it's skid chains for ours," said Joe.

He stopped at the first level place they came to, and, with the help of Dale and Hugh, adjusted skid chains to all four wheels of the truck.

After that going was easier, though it was still painfully slow and tedious.

"There's no doubt about it," said Joe at

last. "We have a fight on our hands if we expect to make Hammerport before dark."

"Sha'n't we be able to reach Elk Lodge tonight?" Rose asked, disappointed.

"Possibly." Joe was dubious. "But I wouldn't count on it. This going is rough."

However, either they made better time than Joe had thought possible or Hammerport was closer than they had calculated. At any rate, despite the increasing inclemency of the weather, the motor truck trundled laboriously into Hammerport in the early afternoon.

"With plenty of time to make the lodge before night!" cried Rose exultantly. "What luck!"

They stopped long enough in Hammerport to load the truck with provisions.

"For," Joe continued, "if the storm continues you will need plenty of provisions. No telling when you will be able to make town again."

Their purchases made, Joe was about to move on in the direction of the lodge when Margy remembered that she had still another errand in the village.

"We shall have to look up Hannah Lockley," she said. "Miss Pepper recommended her as an excellent cook, you know."

But hunting up Hannah Lockley was not the simple matter it had at first appeared. The

snow still fell heavily. It was like a veil drawn across their vision, softening and blurring outlines, obscuring landmarks that should have served as signposts to guide them.

Dale took the note that Miss Pepper had given Margy and returned to the grocery store to ask directions. These were given in what seemed a clear enough manner, but when the young folks attempted to follow them, they found themselves hopelessly at sea.

At the end of a faintly marked road Joe brought the truck to a standstill.

"We can't go any further in this direction, that's one thing sure," he said. "The question now before the court is, where do we go from here?"

It was bitterly cold. Rose found her teeth chattering.

"Joe," she shivered, "do you mean we are lost?"

"Not yet," returned Joe. "But we may be soon!"

CHAPTER XII

The Ice Cracks

"Look!" Helen Blythe had crept up to the driver's seat and was looking over Joe's shoulder. "Isn't that a house over there?"

By straining their eyes the young folks could see what certainly appeared to be a building of some sort.

Dale Elton and Hugh Draper got out and floundered through the snow in the direction of that misty outline while the girls and Joe waited anxiously.

In a few moments the young men reappeared. Even before they reached the motor truck the girls knew that they had good news to report.

"Talk about luck!" cried Dale. "If I ever had that kind in my newspaper work I'd be editor-in-chief within the week!"

"Tell us," shivered Margy, "before we freeze to death!"

"That house over yonder," Hugh contributed, "happens to be the domicile of one, Hannah Lockley."

"Now I ask you!" demanded Dale, grinning. "Can you beat that for luck?"

Hugh reached up a hand to Margy.

"If you will let me have that note Miss Pepper gave you," he suggested, "I think I can persuade the fair Hannah to accompany us to Elk Lodge right away."

"Don't you think I'd better come too?" asked Margy, as she handed the slip to Hugh.

Hugh shook his head.

"You would get your feet wet. Besides," with a quizzical smile, "an attorney always knows how to get along with women!"

"Beware, Helen!" chuckled Margy, and, much to her own annoyance, Helen blushed.

Hugh and Dale disappeared again, armed with the letter from Miss Pepper. The girls waited for what seemed an interminable time while the snow continued to fall in thick, soft flakes and Joe Morris fussed with the motor and fumed at the delay.

"Here they come!" said Rose at last. "And they have Hannah Lockley with them, thank goodness!"

A tall, raw-boned figure strode between the two boys. Hannah Lockley was as tall as Hugh and almost as broad. A formidable figure seen in that misty light and half hidden by falling snow.

At close quarters, Miss Lockley appeared not

one whit less formidable. She had a grim, rough-hewn countenance that looked as if it had been carved out of rock. Her eyes were keen and piercing, her nose high-bridged and hooked like an eagle's, her mouth a wide, obstinate line. She wore her hair dressed high in the manner of an earlier day; a small round hat was perched on the very peak of a topknot.

An absurd enough figure, yet not without a certain dignity. Outwardly Hannah Lockley might be a freak, but one felt instinctively that here was a woman who would stand by her convictions, come what may, whose behavior was prompted by an unswerving allegiance to truth and honor and all the sterner virtues.

As the young men helped Hannah into the truck, the girls felt themselves overwhelmed by so much strength of character.

"We shall have a hard time living up to Hannah," was Margy's thought.

"Thank goodness she is a good cook," said Helen to herself. "If she occupies herself with the mechanics of the kitchen she will have less time for our spiritual, mental, and moral uplift!"

Rose's reaction was frankly one of dismay.

"I'll never get along with that woman!" she told herself. "I'm altogether too frivolous!"

But whatever their opinion of Hannah Lockley, the girls were forced to admit that she be-

came invaluable to them in the course of that wild ride from Hammerport to Elk Lodge.

Hannah, it appeared, had been born on the outskirts of the little village of Hammerport and had lived all her life in the vicinity. It is scarcely too much to say that she could have felt her way, blindfolded, through any part of it.

The snow presented no difficulties to her. She promptly displaced Rose in the seat next the driver. Rose, for her part, was glad enough to crawl back into the truck and cuddle down between Margy and Helen. Hannah saw a road where Joe could discover none. She kept him to the right direction when Joe, left to himself, would inevitably have followed the wrong.

But as they proceeded, climbing ever higher and higher into the hills, the problem became increasingly acute. The wheels of the truck sank deep into the snow. Even skid chains and a powerful motor barely sufficed to conquer the steep grades.

"How much more of this have we got?" cried Joe, fairly at the limit of his endurance.

"Turn to the right along this road," said Hannah Lockley abruptly. She had a thin voice with a nasal twang like a violin string. "From here you go on toward the lake. The lake road ain't so bad."

Poor Joe, unable to see any road, turned blindly to the right and ran the truck square into a snowbank! It snorted—bucked—stopped!

"Now we're done for!" he said. "We'll never get out of this."

"And when Miss Pepper misses her secretary," said Rose mournfully, "she will come up here to find her stuck in a snowbank, frozen into a beautiful statue of ice!"

In spite of their miserable situation they were forced to laugh.

Hugh and Dale climbed out into the snow again—"rubber boots as a part of our equipment would have been invaluable," observed Dale—and pushed the truck backward while Joe raced the motor violently.

They got out of the bank finally, and, under more detailed instructions from Hannah, Joe finally managed to head the truck in the direction of the lake road.

Here, for a short distance, they met with better going. The road, though it continued to climb steadily upward, presented a more gradual incline. The truck did not snort so much; it even appeared to pluck up renewed courage.

"We must be nearly there," said Helen wistfully. "It must be hours since we left Hammerport."

"Cold?" queried Hugh anxiously. "Want my coat, Helen?"

Helen shook her head.

"I'm not a bit cold, only my toes. I'm quite sure they must be frozen stiff."

From his high perch Joe called back:

"I should have had straw piled on the floor in there to keep your feet warm," he said. "An old horsecar trick."

They agreed that next time it might be wise to take such a precaution.

Then a sudden cry from Joe and a jarring of the truck brought them all to their feet in alarm.

"A snowbank!" Joe exclaimed. "Fallen clear across the road. Must be all of eight feet. We can't hope to negotiate that!"

They held a consultation as to what they would best do about it.

"Since going over is out of the question," Dale said, "looks to me as if we'd have to go around."

This was not so easy, either. To the left of them rose a steep hill. To the right of them was the lake, one glaring expanse of snow-encrusted ice.

"I don't like trusting ourselves to that ice," said Joe. "But it looks like our only chance. One thing is pretty sure; we can't stay here all night unless we yearn to freeze to death!"

THE LAKE, NEAR THE SHORE AT LEAST, WAS FROZEN SOLID.

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Once more Hugh and Dale descended into the snow.

"We'll test out that ice," said the young lawyer. "It may be strong enough to bear the weight of the truck."

They came back to report that, as far as they could tell, the lake, near the shore at least, was frozen solid. Hannah Lockley added the information that in that locality the weather had been bitterly cold for the past three weeks.

"Every winter the lake freezes over solid," she added. "They run iceboats from Hammerport with supplies for people who winter along the lake."

Joe looked hopeful.

"Have they been running the iceboats yet?" he asked.

"For nigh on a week," she returned.

"The ice must be pretty good, then," said Joe thoughtfully. "Still, an iceboat is very different from a loaded motor truck. I don't know—"

"Anything is better than staying here all night, Joe," Rose urged shiveringly. "It will soon be dark and then we'll have no choice in the matter."

This final consideration decided Joe. Both Hugh and Dale agreed that they thought the chance was well worth taking.

"The ice will be thick in toward shore," said

Hugh. "Go ahead, old man. We're with you."

"To the death!" said Dale lugubriously.

"Let's hope not!" ejaculated Margy. "What a horrid thing to say!"

Joe backed the truck for a considerable distance along the snow-choked road. His hands gripped the wheel steadily, but his eyes betrayed the fact that he fully realized his grim responsibility.

"If there were any other way—" he thought.

His hands swung the wheel about; the motor truck turned protestingly and lumbered out upon the ice.

The girls held their breath. They could hear the crunching of the ice and snow beneath the heavy wheels. Every moment they expected to feel the solid surface break beneath the load, to experience a sick sinking—

"Hold everything!" It was a hoarse shout from Joe. In it the girls detected sudden panic. At the same moment the rear wheels of the truck sank, ever so gently!

"We're breaking through!" cried Rose, clinging wildly to Helen. "Joe! Joe! Pull out of it, quick!"

CHAPTER XIII

A Face at the Window

Joe Morris heard the crunching that meant the rear wheels had broken through. He felt the truck settle. Beneath him the ice quivered treacherously. At any moment it might splinter into a thousand fragments!

There was only one chance for them. Joe took it unhesitatingly. He gave the motor its head. The truck lurched forward. For a moment the rear wheels turned aimlessly, hovering over an abyss, then were dragged upon the protesting ice.

Over a cracking, whining surface, the big truck plunged laboriously, daring destruction with every second. The ice gave, sickeningly; in some places it cracked wide open; but this happened always in the wake of the plunging truck.

At last the front wheels struck the bank. Joe wagered every last ounce of speed on that desperate climb to solid ground—and won. The road was beneath them again, the treacherous ice left behind.

"Bravo, Joe!" cried Helen. "That was well done!"

Hannah Lockley gripped the edge of the seat with bony fingers. She relaxed a little now, and gasped.

"Land sakes!" she cried. "That was the worst ride ever I had!"

"Thrilling, though short!" giggled Rose, emerging from Helen's arms. "That last desperate dash would have gone strong in the movies, Joe!"

"The movies were never like that!" replied Joe grimly. "For a second or two I thought we were 'gone coons.'"

For what seemed a long time to the young folks, they struggled along the road. They began to be discouraged about Elk Lodge. It seemed to them some mythical place that they would never reach, no matter how hard they tried! They were cold, hungry, tired. Where *was* Elk Lodge?

"There 'tis!" Hannah Lockley pointed a bony finger. "Turn off here to your left."

However, Joe decided not to turn off just in that place.

"Too many snowdrifts," he temporized. "We can leave the truck here and walk the rest of the way."

Hannah Lockley rose and got down stiffly from the truck, assisted by the boys. Next the

girls were lifted down and they all trailed after the tall figure of the spinster. The path she followed appeared entirely visible to her, although all the girls could see was a white drift of snow.

They reached the edge of the clearing and paused, dumbfounded.

Smoke was rising from the chimney of the lodge!

"Ain't nobody supposed to be there," said Hannah Lockley.

"Nevertheless, somebody undoubtedly is," retorted Margy.

"The lodge is already occupied!" cried Helen. "And that means that *we* won't be wanted!"

"A pretty fix," said Rose, stamping her feet in the snow to warm them. "Ouch! My toes are frozen!"

Hannah Lockley continued to shake her head.

"Nobody ain't supposed to be here," she repeated stubbornly. "When folks wants to use the lodge, Miss Pepper, she always lets me know."

"Where there's smoke," said Dale sententiously, pointing to the grey ribbon that curled from the chimney, "there is almost sure to be a fire. However, I would suggest that we go up to the door and learn some facts for ourselves."

Miss Pepper had given Margy the key of the lodge. Hannah Lockley had another, though this Margy did not learn until some time later. Now the girl handed Dale her key and they went on up to the door of the lodge.

Dale was about to fit the key in the lock when he stopped with an exclamation of surprise.

"Why," he cried, "the door is already open!"

"Then some one *is* living here!" cried Rose. "What shall we do?"

"Go on in," advised Hugh. "Chances are this isn't the home of the three bears. The resident probably won't bite."

The door yielded readily to their touch. In another moment the young folks found themselves within a big, log-raftered living room. They glanced hastily about it, but their glance rested on one thing—the fire in the open grate!

"Goodness!" cried Helen. "We'd better call out or something! We don't want the people here to think we are thieves or bandits, breaking into the house this way!"

Hannah was staring, mystified, at the leaping flames in the grate.

"There ain't nobody supposed to be here," she repeated, more stubbornly than before.

Here the boys took a hand.

"We'll go over the place," Joe suggested,

"while you girls warm yourselves in front of the fire."

The girls wanted to help in the search, for their curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, but the fire proved too tempting. They moved closer to it, holding out their hands to the blaze.

They could hear the boys moving about in the adjoining rooms, and presently Margy broke away from the fire.

"I'm going to have a look around myself," she announced. "This looks like real mystery to me and the boys sha'n't have all the fun!"

Rose and Helen followed their sister while Hannah Lockley drew off her hat and marched grimly in the direction of the kitchen.

"I believe that woman would keep at her domestic duties if the house were on fire," chuckled Rose.

"Little she cares if the Pepper lodge is inhabited by tramps," agreed Margy. "She will get dinner anyway."

"An admirable trait," laughed Helen. "I'm nearly famished!"

The lodge was built all on one floor. The living room, as the girls soon ascertained, was the central room. From this, several doors led to other apartments. There were six in all—the girls counted them—and in only one of

these could they find any sign of recent occupation. In one room a bed had been roughly made up. The covers were rumpled and on the dresser was the butt of a cigarette.

Margy picked up the cigarette butt and examined it curiously.

"Some one *has* been here, girls," she said, glancing about her. "And recently. This butt is scarcely cold!"

There was a large closet in the room, as there was in every bedroom of the lodge. Helen crossed to the closet door and resolutely threw it open. If she expected to find there the owner of the dead cigarette, she was agreeably disappointed. The closet, they found on further exploration, was dark and entirely empty.

"That's that!" said Margy, closing the door. "Now where do we look next—on the roof?"

A sharp cry sounded from somewhere in the rear of the house. It was Hannah Lockley's voice, and by the sound of it, Hannah was extremely angry about something.

The girls abandoned the bedroom. The scolding, high-pitched voice led them through the living room to the dining room and to the kitchen beyond that.

A draught of cold air reached them as they rushed into the kitchen. The door was wide open. In the doorway, upraised broom in hand, stood Hannah Lockley.

"Come on in here, you!" she shrilled to an invisible adversary. "You know very well I can't go out there without no overshoes. You're a coward, so you be, to stick out in the dark!"

Margy rushed across the kitchen and grasped the woman's uplifted arm.

"What do you see?" she cried. "Whom are you talking to?"

Hannah Lockley continued to stare into the snow-misted dusk for another moment or two. Then she turned back into the room, favored the girls with a brief glance, and restored the broom to its corner.

"Coward!" she muttered. "Sneakin' around people's houses and then pretendin' he wasn't there."

"*Who* wasn't there?" demanded Rose. "What in the world are you talking about, Hannah Lockley?"

From a table drawer the woman took a carving knife. With it she pointed to one of the kitchen windows.

"Some one was lookin' in," she said briefly. "There was a face, plain as any picture I ever see. But when I got to the door and pulled it open, there wa'n't nobody there—leastways, nobody that wanted to answer me," she added, grimly.

Hugh, Dale and Joe had found their way to

the kitchen. They had listened to the end of Hannah's story with considerable interest.

Hugh advanced to the door and flung it open again, letting in a blast of cold air.

"O-oh!" shivered Rose. "We'll get our death of cold! *Do* shut the door!"

But Dale, glancing over Hugh's shoulder, gave an excited exclamation.

"Footprints!" he cried. "Fresh ones at that!"

CHAPTER XIV

Footprints

The interest of the young folks was now fully aroused. Footprints in the snow, especially fresh footprints, seemed to corroborate Hannah's story of a mysterious face at the window.

The girls forgot that they were hungry, tired, and cold. They followed the boys outside, intent upon solving, if possible, this new mystery.

Dale went ahead, using his flashlight. The footprints were easy to follow. Freshly made in the drifted snow, they were as legible as a printed page.

For a considerable distance back from the house they trailed the prints. At last Dale stopped short, flashed his light upon some object in the path.

"A woodshed!" he said in a low voice, as the others crowded close to him. "The footprints lead directly to the door. Look!"

He flashed the light on the snow again. Directly before the woodshed door footsteps were smudged and run together as though some

one had stood there for a moment before entering the building.

"Looks as if our quarry were inside," he said, in the same cautiously lowered tone. "Well, we'll see!"

As he approached the door, Margy cried out sharply:

"Dale! Be careful!"

There was so much real anxiety in her voice that Dale looked back at her questioningly. Helen and Rose gave her an odd look. Margy bit her lip and said lamely:

"The man behind that door may be a desperate character, for all we know. I don't see any reason for taking silly chances."

"This isn't silly," Dale retorted. "We can't leave you girls here in this lonely spot unless we are sure you will be safe."

He tried the latch of the door. As he expected, it refused to yield.

"Locked from the inside," he explained briefly. "If you fellows will lend a hand—"

Joe and Hugh lent more than a hand—they lent two shoulders, the weight of which was more than enough to break down the rather flimsy woodshed door.

The boys fairly fell into the building. At the same time, Hugh shouted:

"Keep out of the way, girls! There may be trouble!"

There was silence within the woodshed. The boys stooped low for the first few moments, half expecting to hear the sound of shots.

When nothing happened and the silence remained unbroken, Dale Elton raised his torch and flashed it about the enclosure.

"Nothing here!" the girls heard Joe exclaim.

"There's an open window," added Hugh. "Probably got out by that."

The girls crowded into the shed and saw the window Hugh spoke of. It had evidently been open some moments, for upon the ledge and on the floor beneath it was a fine drifting of snow.

Hugh closed the window while Dale flashed his light once more about the shed. In one corner was firewood, piled up nearly to the roof. In another logs were stacked, evidently for the purpose of feeding the many fireplaces at the lodge. There were no odd corners where a fugitive might hide. Whoever the mysterious occupant of Elk Lodge might be, it was certain that he had made his escape through the woodshed window while the recent arrivals had been tracking him to the woodshed door.

"There will be more footprints under the window," Hugh suggested. "Let's have a look."

The young folks abandoned the woodshed, first setting the door in place as best they could.

The girls were shivering, half with cold and half with excitement.

As Hugh had predicted, they found footprints in plenty beneath the window.

"The footprints were made by the same person, all right," said Dale, bending to examine them. "They lead straight off toward the woods, too. Well, we can follow them that far, anyway."

Again the trail was plainly marked, but this time the footprints were more widely spaced.

"The fugitive started to run here," Hugh said. "Thought it time to use a little speed!"

Straight down to the woods, the trail led. At the fringe of trees Dale halted. Night was approaching, but there was an early moon.

"Footprints will be difficult to follow in here," he said dubiously. "A job like this requires daylight. Nevertheless, we'll see what we can do."

Into the woods they went, walking Indian file, careful not to confuse their own footsteps with those of the fugitive. But they had gone only a short distance when Dale announced ruefully that he had lost the trail.

The others stood still while he doubled on his tracks.

"Nothing doing," he said at last ruefully. "I thought I had it, but it was only my own

footprints. I guess we've done all we can for to-night."

Feeling puzzled and apprehensive, they retraced their steps to the lodge.

Hannah, they found, had not been idle during their absence. She had returned to the truck, found some of the provisions, lighted a fire in the stove, and was already busy with preparations for dinner.

"A treasure!" murmured Rose.

"More than that, a paragon," returned Margy.

"And absolutely without curiosity," added Helen. "Evidently, she doesn't care at all to know whether we found the owner of the face she saw at the window!"

As a matter of fact, Hannah Lockley did not care to know. Being entirely practical, it was enough for her to be assured that the unwarranted intrusion of the lodge was at an end. She was not troubled by curiosity, nor was she blessed—or cursed—by too much imagination. Lucky Hannah Lockley!

While the meal was in progress of preparation the young folks busied themselves with other necessary tasks.

Luggage and the remainder of the provisions were brought in. They found that the lodge was equipped with bracketed lamps, and when

these were filled from a big oil can found in the woodshed, gave quite a cheery, old-world effect.

Each room had its fireplace. In all of these fires were made by the boys. Hugh and Dale and Joe piled on logs recklessly. They found that the living room fire had burned low and this they also built up until it was a leaping mass of flames.

"The mystery fire!" murmured Margy, looking down at it. "Whose author may always remain a mystery! Who do you suppose did it, girls, anyway?"

Helen shook her head and moved closer to the fire.

"A tramp, probably," she said. "That seems the most probable theory."

"Pretty far up in the woods for tramps," Rose suggested. "Unless the lodge is a sort of headquarters for a band of them," she added brightly.

Margy chuckled.

"What an awful suggestion!" she cried. "Please don't try any more like that, Posie—not before dinner, anyway!"

The boys came in with the last load from the truck.

"It's stopped snowing at last," Joe announced. "I think," he added hesitantly, "that if we expect to make Hammerport to-

night we had better get going right away and not wait for dinner."

"But you can't reach Hammerport tonight," Helen protested. "Why, think of the trouble we had getting here!"

"We won't make the mistake of trying to imitate an iceboat again," stated Dale. "We will stick to the road."

"We've been having a pow-wow with the fair Hannah," Joe explained. "She says there is another road back to the village. It is picked out with signposts so that you can't go far wrong. Going back it will be downhill all the way, too, which makes it considerably easier."

"I don't see why you have to rush off," pouted Rose.

"*I* don't," grinned Joe. "But this prominent young lawyer and that eminent journalist," indicating Dale and Hugh, "feel that they must be back again on the job."

"It might not be a bad idea to call up Hammerport and reserve rooms. Hannah says there is a hotel there."

A telephone stood on a small table against the wall. Dale went over to it and lifted the receiver. The girls watched him curiously. Rose still pouted a little.

After uttering several impatient "hellos" into the mouthpiece without receiving a reply, Dale regarded the instrument more closely.

"What's the matter?" asked Hugh. "Out of order?"

"Dead," said Dale briefly. "Weight of snow on the wires, perhaps—" He broke off, stared for a moment at something none of the rest of them could see, then said something softly beneath his breath.

"What's the matter?" cried Margy.

"Why—why, nothing," said Dale, trying to speak in his natural voice. "Only—the telephone wire seems to be broken, that's all."

"That wire was never broken." Margy spoke quietly as she bent over to examine the severed ends of the cord. "It has been cut, Dale Elton! And what's more, you know it!"

"Yes," Dale nodded. "It has been cut."

Rose was puzzled.

"You mean that some one deliberately cut the wire so as to put the 'phone out of commission?" she asked.

"Probably," said Dale briefly.

"But why?" persisted Rose.

Dale shook his head. The young journalist looked suddenly very serious.

"I only wish we knew!" he said.

CHAPTER XV

Noises in the Night

Some one had deliberately cut the telephone wires! The boys remembered having seen an extension telephone in one of the bedrooms. Upon examination they found that the wire to this had been cut also.

Rose's question, "Why?" found an echo in the thoughts of them all.

"The place seems full of mystery," said Helen. "I don't half like it."

"Whoever built the fire in the living room grate and left those footprints in the snow probably cut the telephone wire, as well," said Rose.

"Which doesn't help us answer the question 'why?' " said Margy wearily. "I don't like unsolved riddles."

"Just the same, I'd as soon this one remained unsolved," said Helen. "For my part, I hope we have seen the last of this mysterious cutter of telephone wires."

"Anyway, the damage is easily repaired,"

said Hugh. "Lucky the trouble isn't with one of the outside wires."

Joe carried a kit of tools in the truck. With these he was soon at work on the wires. Hannah came in to announce that dinner was ready, but Joe refused to leave his "job" until it was completed.

"Now try it," he said at last. He rose with a satisfied air and dusted the knees of his trousers. "I think you can get Hammerport without any trouble now."

Helen lifted the receiver and was relieved to hear an answering voice. She handed the 'phone over to Dale, who immediately called the hotel in Hammerport.

"What will you bet we won't be able to get accommodations?" demanded Dale, while he waited for an answer.

However, it proved easy enough to get rooms for himself and his companions, and Dale engaged them for that night.

But now that everything was arranged, the young fellows found it very difficult to say good-by.

"We hate to leave you here—especially under the circumstances," said Dale reluctantly.

"Nonsense!" Margy countered. "Just because we come to the lodge and find a ready-made mystery waiting for us isn't to say we

are in any danger. Whoever was here has gone—and that's all there is to it!"

Although Joe was as reluctant to leave as the others, his was the responsibility of pilot, and he was eager to start back to Hammerport before the moon went down.

"You should have supper first, at least," protested Helen. "You will be famished before you get to Hammerport."

"Then we'll rout out the chef and make him get us something to eat," said Hugh cheerfully. "Don't worry about us, Helen. We won't starve!"

The girls insisted upon going with the boys as far as the truck. There they said a final good-by and watched, with a sinking feeling at the heart, while Joe backed his truck and turned it about in the narrow road.

"We'll telephone from Hammerport," Joe shouted, waving to them.

"And if there are many more heavy snowstorms, we'll come and dig you out," said Dale, hanging over the back of the truck. "So long, Margy Blythe! Don't fall in love with one of those handsome iceboat pilots while I'm gone!"

"Don't forget to paint some pictures, Nell," Hugh added. "You might save one for me!"

"I'll paint you a picture of the woodshed," laughed Helen.

The truck panted, puffed, lumbered heavily away. In a few moments it was nothing but a darker blot against the uniform greyness of the snow.

The girls turned back to the lodge, feeling oddly depressed.

"I only hope they will get to Hammerport safely," said Helen. "It seems to me the chances are ten to one of their being swallowed in a snowdrift."

"It would take a big snowdrift to swallow them, truck and all," chuckled Margy. "Away with such gloomy forebodings! Let's go in and eat Hannah Lockley's dinner and—hope for the best."

They found Hannah looking very dignified and slightly grim.

"She doesn't like her meals kept waiting," whispered Rose.

"We'll have to make a note of that," Margy returned, also in a whisper.

The girls ate their first dinner in the dining hall of the lodge. Despite its studied air of rustic simplicity, it was a stately room. In every detail, even to the huge, antlered heads that decorated the walls, it spoke of Pepper wealth, of Pepper influence. The long central table was heavily carved, the Indian rugs on the floor were valuable.

Hannah had set the girls far down at one

end of the long table. They felt lost and curiously lonely.

"I can imagine that the ghosts of people dead and gone are in the other chairs," said Rose. "Why didn't Hannah put us in the kitchen? We'd have felt far more at home!"

After dinner the girls turned their attention to bedmaking. Hannah introduced them to a large linen chest where they found everything necessary for their comfort, including blankets.

"Need airin'," was Hannah's comment, "but that can't be done now. Anyways, you will be comfortable for the night."

The girls hoped they would. But, remembering the mysterious fire in the grate, the mysterious footprints leading up to the woodhouse door, the girls were by no means sure that they would find comfort at Elk Lodge that night!

They debated for a considerable time upon what rooms they would occupy. By mutual consent they avoided the room where they had found the bed made up and the remains of a dead cigarette.

"We'll clear *that* all up to-morrow," Helen decided. "But for to-night I think we had better select sleeping quarters on the other side of the living room!"

Rose declared that she would not, under any

circumstances, consent to sleep alone in that house. So it was decided that Helen and Rose room together, Margy valiantly declaring that Elk Lodge held no terrors for her, inside or out.

However, when they were all settled for the night an hour or so later, Margy rather regretted her temerity. The house was very quiet. Helen and Rose had said good night. In the adjoining room she heard one of the girls open a window. The sound reminded her that she must do likewise.

She opened the window and stared out at the snow. The night had cleared, she noticed. By putting her head out the window she could see that the stars were out, shining and twinkling at a dizzing distance above the earth.

She drew her head back and shivered.

"Br-r-r! It's cold!"

She crept into bed and pulled the blankets up under her chin. In spite of herself, that open window worried her.

"It's too close to the ground," she thought drowsily. "Sleeping rooms should be—on—second floor. Shall I close it—or—not—"

She must have fallen asleep then, for it was some time later that she awoke with a start to find herself sitting upright in bed. She was shivering, whether with cold or fright, she did not know. What had awakened her?

She started to draw a blanket up about her shoulders—and stopped.

There *was* a sound, distinct, unmistakable! Some one was moving stealthily in the living room!

Now Margy began to shiver and shake in earnest.

"I'm not f-frightened," she told herself indignantly. "I'm just cold!"

Perhaps Rose or Helen or even Hannah Lockley had wanted a drink and had got up to get it. There was the simple, sensible explanation. She would call out and ask who it was!

But when she opened her mouth Margy found she could not force herself to make a sound.

There it was again! This time the noise was sudden and sharp as though some one had blundered inadvertently against a piece of furniture.

Margy summoned all her courage, slipped her feet into mules, flung a bathrobe about her shoulders, and tip-toed over to the door. As she was about to open it a clamor rose, so sharp and terrifying in the silent house, that Margy cried aloud.

The next moment she had flung open the door and stepped into the living room.

CHAPTER XVI

Behind the Tree

As Margy Blythe stumbled blindly across the room she collided with some one. She clutched desperately at an arm and cried in a loud, strident tone:

"I've got you now. No use to try to get away! What do you mean by sneaking about other people's houses?"

"Margy!" gasped a voice she knew well. "For goodness' sake, let go my arm. You're hurting me!"

Ruefully Margy obeyed.

"Helen—I—I'm sorry," she stammered. "How was I to know it was you?"

The loud shrilling of the telephone which had startled Margy before recommenced.

"Somebody answer that 'phone, do!" This time it was Rose's voice. "It makes noise enough to wake the dead!"

No one seemed to remember just where the 'phone was located. They stumbled about in the darkness, falling over furniture and getting in each other's way.

Finally Helen, guided by the clamor of the bell, found the instrument and gripped it firmly. As she did so Hannah Lockley appeared, carrying a lamp.

"What's all the noise about?" demanded the woman. Her hair was done up in curl papers and she wore a flannelette nightgown high in the neck.

"A perfect example of how not to look!" thought Rose hysterically.

"The 'phone rang," Margy explained and added unnecessarily: "We are just answering it."

Hannah looked disapproving, as though answering the telephone at that time of night was something to be deplored!

Helen lifted the receiver.

"Hello! Hello! Oh—*Hugh!*"

"The boys!" Rose dropped into a chair and began to wave an imaginary fan. "At this hour! It must be three o'clock!"

"You got stuck in a snowdrift?" Helen's voice continued. "How awful! How did you —Oh, another car helped you out? Well, that was lucky anyway—Are you quite sure you're all right? No cold from exposure or anything? —Yes, do that, Hugh! Make them give you a good hot drink or something—How are we? Oh, excellent!—No, haven't heard or seen a thing alarming since you left—"

Remembering what *she* had heard in the library, Margy was inclined to qualify that statement in her own mind.

"Yes we will take care of ourselves, Hugh! There isn't a thing to worry about, really—Yes, we will—Yes—Good-by!"

Helen hung up the receiver and looked at her sisters.

"They just reached Hammerport," she reported. "They were stuck in a snowdrift when two other cars came up behind them and helped to push them out. They are all right now, Hugh says. He called up as much to find whether the telephone was still working as to give us the news of their safe arrival."

"Well, we found out that the telephone was working, all right!" said Rose. She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. "It's cold, girls. I'm going back to bed."

"The best thing," said Hannah severely. "You'll all be catchin' your death of cold."

She turned to go out but Margy checked her.

"Leave the lamp, please, Hannah. We will put it out when we get ready."

Hannah put the lamp on the table and disappeared. Helen and Rose turned to Margy inquiringly.

"You wanted to get rid of Hannah," said Helen quickly. "Is anything wrong?"

Margy told as briefly as possible about the

sounds she had heard in the living room just before the telephone rang.

"No, I could scarcely have imagined it and I wasn't dreaming," she said, with so much earnestness that her hearers were immediately convinced. "I distinctly heard cautious footsteps in this room and then a louder noise as if some one had bumped into a piece of furniture. I was just screwing up my courage to come in and investigate when the telephone rang."

"Mercy! Th-that's terrible!" shivered Rose. "If you say another word, Margy Blythe, I'm going back to bed and pull the covers over my head!"

"I think we should look around first and see if anything has been disturbed," Margy suggested relentlessly.

"I think so, too," agreed Helen quietly. "You may stay here, if you like, Posie."

"While you t-take the light?" cried Rose. "I guess not! I'd rather die with you than without you!"

It was a rather shuddery band of girls who made the rounds of the lodge that night. It must be admitted that their investigation was not carried out with too great thoroughness. There were so many shadowy dark corners that might contain any number of terrifying possibilities!

However, when they congregated in the living room once more they were reasonably certain that there was no one but themselves and Hannah Lockley in the house.

Margy made a desperate attempt to justify herself with the girls.

"I know you must think more than ever now that I dreamed it all," she said. "But, really, I didn't, girls. I was as wide awake as I am at this moment and what I heard, I *know* I heard!"

"The lodge must be inhabited by ghosts," said Rose, too weary to feel frightened. "Anyway, I vote we go to bed and let the spirits roam to their hearts content."

There seemed nothing else to do. But when Margy returned to her room, she very carefully closed and locked the window and locked the door.

"If anything else happens to-night, it can happen!" she said, as she climbed shiveringly under the covers. "I won't get out of this bed again for anything!"

But what a different place the lodge appeared, viewed in the sunlight of a new day! For the first time the girls realized its possibilities.

There were many windows and each one had its quota of sunlight. The furniture that had seemed almost oppressive the night before was

now merely massive and comfortable. Even the dining room with its beamed ceiling and long table seemed almost chummy in the daylight!

The girls gathered there for breakfast. They were bright-eyed and gay even after a night of interrupted sleep.

"Imagine the members of a hunting party meeting here at break o' day," said Rose, looking about the big room. "A woodsy breeze coming in at the open windows, the sound of horses stamping and champing outside, a bugle sounding somewhere! Lovely!"

"Sounds like a stage hunting scene," said practical Margy. "Here the men probably tramp out in corduroy hunting breeches and flannel shirts and come back with a rabbit or two in the bag!"

"How ordinary!" cried Rose. "I like the idea of my champing horses much better!"

After breakfast they went in and made up their beds. "We can't leave *everything* to poor Hannah," said Helen—then pulled on the heavy rubber boots they had been thoughtful enough to provide for the occasion and prepared for a tramp in the woods.

"Sweaters under coats is the rule," said Helen.

"What do we care if we look like stuffed partridges?" giggled Rose.

"Warmth's the thing," agreed Margy. "I imagine we'll find the weather pretty nippy up in these woods."

Before they left Helen got ready her sketching materials.

"Just in case I see anything worth sketching," she explained.

They had not gone far in the woods before Helen realized that she was facing an embarrassment of riches.

"It won't be *what* to paint, but *what not* to paint," she cried. "Girls, I could do a dozen pictures here!"

Margy smiled and hugged her sister.

"I told you I'd get Elk Lodge for you, Nell!" she said. "And I did!"

They found the walking comparatively easy, for the weather was bitterly cold and a hard crust of ice had formed over the snow. Up hill and down dale they went while Helen stopped occasionally to sketch a subject that appealed to her and mark it down for further study.

Only when the hands of Margy's wrist watch began to creep toward twelve did they turn back toward the lodge. When they came in sight of the rambling log building, Helen said suddenly:

"How cozy and pleasant and absolutely unmysterious it looks! It seems hard to believe

that so many odd things have happened since last night!"

"Doesn't it!" agreed Margy. "First the fire in the living room grate; then signs of occupancy in one of the bedrooms; footprints leading to the woodshed; and, still later, the sound of some one moving furtively about the living room. There must be an explanation of all these strange happenings, and I'd like to know what it is."

"Tramps," said Rose laconically. "Or *a* tramp."

"Most likely," Margy agreed. "And if that's so, the intruder has probably taken his departure before this. Think how mad he must be," she added, with a chuckle, "to be chased out of such a warm, soft nest!"

"It was thoughtless of us," laughed Helen. "I agree with you. The intruder has every right to bear us a grudge!"

After luncheon they wandered down to the lake.

"Oh!" cried Rose, as the trees cleared and they caught a full view of it, "isn't that the prettiest picture you ever saw?"

The girls agreed that they had seldom seen a prettier sight than Elk Lake on that bright winter afternoon.

Iceboats skimmed over the smooth surface. Sun gleamed on the white sails as the swift

craft swooped and turned with all the grace of birds on the wing. There were skaters, too, and a few hardy souls on skis.

"Let's get our skates," proposed Rose eagerly. "No use our just looking on at all the fun."

But Helen was busy getting out her sketch-book and pencil and color box. There was the look on her face that it always wore when she was eager to immortalize some beautiful thing.

"You go," she said absently. "And Margy. I've got to get this picture! I must!"

Without a word Margy opened the collapsible camp stool Helen always carried when on a hunt for "subjects." Then, as the young artist began to sketch rapidly, with a glowing look in her eyes, Margy motioned to Rose.

"Come," she said softly. "Helen will probably be here for hours. Chances are she won't even miss us!"

Helen did not. Blissfully unconscious of everything about her, she sketched for hours, first one scene, then another in the changing panorama before her. Later she would select the sketch that appealed to her most and transfer it to canvas, enlarging it, completing it, *loving* it into life.

The shadows were growing long when Helen looked up from her work. To her surprise she saw that most of the iceboats had disappeared.

There was only an isolated one or two now. The skaters had gone in.

It was growing bitterly cold. A chill breeze came up from the lake bringing the threat of more snow. Helen shivered and pulled the collar of her coat close about her ears.

"A good day's work," she thought exultantly, riffling the pages of her sketchbook. "A wonderful day's work. There's enough work here to keep me busy for weeks!"

It was when she was folding up the camp stool that she became uneasily aware that some one was watching her.

"Nonsense!" she cried with a shrug of her shoulders and an uneasy glance about. "I'm tired. Just imagining things."

But when she turned to go back to the lodge she was quite certain that some one, or something, dodged furtively behind a tree and hid there!

CHAPTER XVII

The Attack

Helen Blythe stood quite still. It was not that she was afraid to move but that she was trying to decide what to do next.

It was necessary to pass that tree on her way back to the lodge. Startled as she was, the prospect did not appeal to her. Still, she could not stand there, holding her sketchbook in one hand, the camp stool and color box in the other, indefinitely. Besides, she was cold.

A glance at the lake assured her that there was no help from that quarter. The last ice-boat had disappeared and the last skater. The white surface looked curiously desolate in the fading light.

Helen stared at the tree until it took on a sinister aspect. She half expected it to reach out gnarled arms and grip her.

"This will never do," she told herself. "In just a very few minutes I'll succeed in working myself up to a lovely state of nerves."

She walked slowly forward, wondering if she would actually have the courage to brave

that lonely avenue of trees, having seen what she had seen.

The courage was there, Helen found. She marched bravely into the woods and walked with quick step toward the lodge. She looked neither to right nor left, knowing that if she did so panic would descend upon her and she would begin to run.

She saw no one. But more than once she had the distinct impression that some one followed her, keeping in the shelter of the trees. A sudden sharp crunching as though a foot had broken through the crust of ice almost made her turn her head. But she hurried on, eyes straight before her, tightly gripping her sketch-book, her stool, and her color box.

When the lodge appeared before her, rising suddenly out of the trees, she could scarcely suppress a cry of relief.

She ran the few remaining steps to the door, fumbled at it with numbed fingers. It gave at last and she stumbled into the warmth of the big central room.

Margy and Rose came to meet her. They wore coats and boots.

"We were on our way to get you," Rose explained. "Hated to bother you till the last minute—"

"But we know when you are sketching you never know when it's time to come home,"

added Margy. "Dinner is just about ready and if you are as starved as we are, you won't keep it waiting to-night."

Helen controlled her agitation, thankful that the girls had noticed nothing odd about her boisterous entrance.

"No use worrying them," she thought. "There has been excitement enough since we arrived. Time enough to speak later if I find it necessary."

Nevertheless, the effect of that frightening experience was to leave Helen uneasy, suspicious, inclined to attach importance to the most trivial incident. She started at the slightest sound, glanced frequently at the door and was so palpably nervous that Rose and Margy both remarked it.

"I'm just tired," Helen explained. "I've done a marvelous day's work and now I'm feeling the reaction. That's all!"

Margy was far from convinced that "that was all," but she obligingly changed the subject, just the same.

"Rose and I skated all afternoon," she said. "Part of the lake was swept clear of snow by the wind, and the ice made wonderful skating. You were so absorbed with your work you never saw us," she added teasingly.

"You must go with us to-morrow, Nell,"

Rose urged. "Pleasure before duty, you know."

"I'd love to," Helen returned and meant it. "After to-day's work I think I can afford to take a few hours off." But in the back of her mind a voice whispered insistently: "Some one was watching me this afternoon. I'm quite sure I couldn't have imagined it!"

Next morning the sun shone through a haze. The temperature, if anything, was lower than it had been the day before. The girls shivered as they knelt at the edge of the lake to put on their shoes and skates. Rose cast a doubtful eye at the sky.

"Snow again soon, that's sure," she prophesied.

Margy, struggling with an obstinate shoelace, mumbled something about the "orneriness" of shoelaces in general.

"Don't predict more snow," she said, blowing on numbed fingers. "If we have much more the lodge will be snowed under. Then where would all our lovely skating be?"

"All the more reason to enjoy it while we can," said Helen pacifically. "I'm ready, girls," she added, sniffing the air eagerly. "I'll race you to that iceboat over there."

Off they went, skimming over the ice. It gave them a sense of immense freedom. They felt

that they could go on and on that way forever.

Helen was the first to reach the iceboat, but Rose declared the race unfair since Helen had got off to a head start. The race had to be run over again and this time Margy had slightly the better of it, finishing "with a nose to spare!"

It was not long before the girls forgot all about being cold. They were glowing to their finger tips, blood racing with the vigorous exercise.

"Wish the boys could be here," Rose said longingly. "Think how they would have enjoyed this sort of thing!"

"Poor dears," laughed Margy. "In a day or two I suppose they will be slaving away at business again while we continue to have the time of our lives up here. No wonder Joe says, 'pretty soft!' "

At luncheon time ravenous appetites drove them homeward. They entered the lodge, sniffing hungrily and prepared to do full justice to Hannah's culinary skill.

To their surprise no alluring aroma greeted them upon the opening of the door. Feeling slightly aggrieved, they went in search of food and Hannah.

They found neither.

In the empty kitchen they turned and regarded each other.

"Where is she?" demanded Rose.

"If we knew that," Margy retorted a little crossly, "we might get some lunch!"

They looked all over the house for the woman, even in the closets. They called her name but remained unanswered.

"Some one has run off with her," said Rose, and Margy sniffed.

"She hardly looks like the type of person any one would run off with," she said.

Rose giggled.

"Well, if you *will* take me literally—"

"I don't like the look of this, girls," interrupted Helen seriously. "Hannah Lockley would hardly disappear for no reason at all. I'm afraid harm may have come to her."

Margy gave her sister a sharp glance.

"What kind of harm?" she demanded.

"I don't know," said Helen soberly. "But I'd suggest that we keep on looking until we find her."

Since there was no trace of Hannah Lockley in the house, the girls decided to look outdoors for her.

"Though we haven't the slightest idea where to begin," said Rose.

Margy silenced her with an uplifted hand.

"Listen!" she said. "I thought I heard something."

The bitter wind brought to their ears a groan,

a miserable and hollow sound. It seemed to come from somewhere outside the house and was almost immediately followed by a faint persistent rapping.

"The ghost!" cried Rose. "Good-by, folks, I'm on my way!"

"Don't be silly!" cried Margy. "That's no more a ghost than you are!"

The groans and ghostly tapping continued. They seemed to come from the direction of the woodshed. Margy ran toward it, with the others at her heels.

The woodshed door had not been repaired since the night the boys had broken it down. Now the girls found it set loosely in place and experienced no difficulty in pushing it aside.

Margy, the first to enter the shed, stepped back with a cry of alarm. Hannah Lockley lay full length on the floor. Her hands were bound behind her, a shawl was flung over her head, the ends tied so that she could not shake it off. In the fingers of one bound hand she held a monkey wrench.

Helen pushed Margy aside and knelt down beside the poor woman. She unfastened the shawl and flung it to one side.

"Hannah! are you hurt?" she cried anxiously. "What happened to you?"

Hannah sat up. She tried to shake her bound fists.

"Don't ask me who done it, 'cause I don't know," she cried. Come up behind me, he did, and flung the shawl over my head. Then he tied my hands and feet and went on out. I'll git even with him," she continued furiously, "if it's the last thing I do."

Little by little the girls coaxed the story from her. They unbound her wrists and ankles and Helen massaged them gently. The cords had been bound cruelly tight. While she performed this service, Helen put questions quietly.

"I don't know nothin'," said Hannah, grown suddenly sullen. "I came out here to the woodshed and in a minute somebody threw a shawl over my head, like I told you. Then he bound me up. I felt around with my hands till I came to the monkey wrench. Then I began tappin' on the wall and hollerin'."

"How long ago was this?" asked Helen.

"Couldn't tell, exactly. Maybe one hour, maybe two. Anyways, it seemed a long while to me."

The girls exchanged glances. The same thought flashed into the mind of each of them. Whoever had imprisoned Hannah Lockley in the woodshed had, in all probability, done so because he wished some time alone in the lodge. What vandalism might have taken place during their absence they dared not even guess.

"Listen," said Margy getting to her feet.

"I'm going back to the house. May as well know the worst, right now!"

They all went, Hannah hobbling on swollen, painful ankles and muttering to herself.

"It's snowing again," Rose remarked. "Hard, too. I told you we were going to have another storm."

Her sisters made no comment. The fact that it was snowing meant little to them just then.

Upon reaching the house, Hannah went direct to the pantry. She gasped and threw up her hands in dismay.

"Gone! Cleaned out!" she cried. "That scoundrel has gone and took every last bit of our food!"

CHAPTER XVIII

In a Bad Fix

On closer inspection the Blythe girls found that Hannah had exaggerated a little. There was still some food on the pantry shelves; enough canned goods to last the girls and Hannah a day or two, perhaps. But nearly all the provisions that they had so carefully laid in had been stolen. The pantry was in disorder, pans and utensils spread about as though the marauder had been in a great hurry to make off with his loot.

"The scoundrel may still be in the house," Helen suggested.

Margy thought this was unlikely, considering the time he had had in which to make his escape and the fact that they had not seen him while searching for Hannah.

Nevertheless, they searched the lodge thoroughly, even looking under beds and dressers.

"He got away, all right," said Rose. "Let's look outside. Perhaps we can pick up his trail in the snow."

This, however, they found impossible. The new fall of snow had obliterated whatever tracks there may have been. It was impossible to guess in what direction the thief had made his escape.

A sharp wind drove the girls back to the house. The snow, half sleet as it was, stung their faces and made them thankful for shelter.

"Looks like a real blizzard this time," said Helen anxiously.

"And scarcely a thing to eat in the pantry," said Margy ruefully. "I wish I could catch that thief!"

Rose disappeared into the room she shared with Helen. They heard her rummaging in the drawers. In a moment she came to the living room door.

"My money is gone!" she exclaimed turning a tragic face to her sisters. "Look! I kept it right in the corner of this drawer. The thief has taken pocketbook and all!"

Helen and Margy made a quick search and found that they, too, had been robbed of every cent of cash they had with them.

They sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at each other, white-faced.

"*Now* what are we going to do?" cried Helen. "We haven't even enough to get us back to New York!"

Margy glanced out of the window and

shrugged her shoulders. Hers was the calmness of despair.

"If this storm keeps up we won't be able to get to New York, anyway," she said. "The way things look now, we'll be lucky if we don't starve to death up here!"

After a while they were able to take a slightly more optimistic view of what seemed, on the face of it, a pretty desperate situation.

"After all, we needn't starve as long as Miss Pepper's credit is good," said Margy, with a sorry attempt at flippancy. "We can have supplies sent up by iceboat from Hammerport and charge them."

"If we can get supplies through," said Helen thoughtfully.

Every moment saw an increase in the fury of the storm. The wind whistled through the trees and about the lodge, making a dismal undertone to the sound of icy snow driven against the windowpanes. Outside, icicles hung from the branches of the trees.

"We'd better 'phone at once," decided Margy. "I'll go and ask Hannah to make out a list of the things needed."

They found with relief that the telephone was still in working order. Five minutes later a message was put through to Hammerport. The storekeeper was affable but refused to guarantee prompt delivery of the order.

"We will push it through if possible," he said, and with this half-promise the girls were forced to be content.

Margy left the telephone and went over to the fireplace. Hannah had placed a fresh log on the fire and the flames roared with a cheery, reassuring sound.

"Poor Hannah," said Margy. "What a shaking up she had!"

Helen shook her head soberly.

"All this has happened in such a short space of time that I can't realize it fully yet," she said. "I suppose," she added, "that we can blame all the mysterious disturbances and this last dreadful thing that has happened on the same person."

"The tramp," and Rose nodded.

Margy looked thoughtful.

"I'm not strong for that tramp theory, myself," she protested. "I doubt if a tramp would have hung around the lodge so long. Knowing his hide-out discovered, he would probably have left without delay."

"Have you any other theory, then?" asked Helen.

Margy shook her head.

"No. Unless—" She paused abruptly. An object on the mantelshelf had caught her attention. It was an old pipe, darkened and mellowed from much use.

"Girls," said Margy slowly, "this—wasn't here before to-day, was it? Look close, please!"

Something in Margy's words excited her sisters. They felt that they were on the verge of an important discovery. They regarded the odorous pipe with interest but no recognition.

"I'm quite sure it wasn't here before," said Helen slowly. "I remember noticing that there was nothing on the shelf over the fireplace."

"Me, too," said Rose ungrammatically. "That pipe is an entirely new ornament, Margy."

"Then," said Margy slowly, "I believe we have the name of our—tramp."

There was a brief pause while Margy regarded the pipe in her hands and Helen and Rose regarded Margy.

"I know who owns this pipe," said the dark-haired girl, at last. "I have seen it many times. It belongs to Rex Pepper!"

"Are you sure?" cried Helen.

"As sure as I have ever been of anything in my life," answered Margy. "It's reasonable, too, girls, don't you see?" she continued swiftly. "We know for a fact that Rex Pepper has escaped. What more natural than that he should have come up here, away off from everybody, to hide? How could he know that his aunt would lend the place to us during her

absence? Answer is, he couldn't. He had every reason to believe he would be safe in occupying the lodge—for the winter months, anyway."

"Sounds logical enough, for a fact," nodded Helen. "If your theory is right it explains a good many things we haven't been able to figure out."

"It explains everything," cried Margy enthusiastically. "He slept in that room where we found the made-up bed and the cigarette stump. He was probably enjoying a good smoke before the fire when he heard us drive up. Then he ran out to hide in the woodshed—"

"Thought the police were after him, maybe," interjected Rose.

Margy nodded.

"Probably. And when we followed him there he did a quick duck into the woods and hid until we had given up the search."

"And after we had gone to bed he probably came back and spent a nice quiet night in the house," said Rose, with a shiver. "We didn't lock all the windows that first night, you know."

"There are ways of opening windows, even if they are locked," said Margy grimly. "I've no doubt Rex Pepper knows them all!"

Rose sat up suddenly.

"Then it was Rex you heard in the living room that night just before the boys called us up from Hammerport!" she ejaculated.

"Without doubt it was," said Margy. "Maybe he was looking for his pipe," she added, with a wry smile.

Now it was Helen's turn to tell of the skulking figure she had seen watching her from behind the shelter of the trees.

"Rex again!" ejaculated Margy promptly. "Wanted to see what you were up to, probably."

Rose shuddered.

"It's a wonder he didn't come in and murder us all in our beds," she said. "Ugh! I'm sure I sha'n't sleep another night in this horrible house."

"He hates us girls and he hates me in particular," said Margy. "I suppose he thinks that, by stealing our money and supplies, he has evened up the score between us."

"I'll say he has!" said Rose emphatically. "A pretty fix we're in, thanks to him!"

"I think we ought to notify the police." Margy went over to the 'phone and fingered it thoughtfully. "Miss Pepper's tin box with the stolen bonds may be among Rex Pepper's possessions. At least, I think the authorities would be exceedingly glad to know of his whereabouts."

She picked up the 'phone. For several seconds she tried vainly to establish connection with the outside world. A blank look overspread her face. Then she quietly replaced the receiver on the hook and faced her startled sisters.

"The 'phone is out of order," she announced.

CHAPTER XIX

Cut Off

The telephone was dead!

It took the Blythe girls a moment or two to realize all that this new misfortune might mean to them. The situation had been fairly difficult before. Now, cut off as they were from contact with the outside world, it threatened to become desperate.

"We were lucky to get our order through to Hammerport, anyway," was Helen's first reaction. "If we had waited half an hour we would have been too late."

"Wires are probably down outside," said Margy. "Weight of snow and ice too much for them."

"Unless Rex Pepper got busy with his little pair of clippers," suggested Rose.

Margy looked startled and searched under the table for a severed wire.

"Not inside—outside," said Rose.

Margy shook her head.

"I don't think we can blame this on Rex," she said. "Miss Pepper's rascally young

nephew probably cleared out of here an hour or two ago and we have used the 'phone within the past half hour, you know."

Rose was impressed, but unconvinced.

"I wouldn't put anything beyond Rex Pepper," she asserted. "Horrid old thing! I'd not be at all surprised to find that he was hanging around here, yet."

"Cheerful thought!" exclaimed Helen.

"If he hangs around much right now, he'll get cold feet," said practical Margy.

Hannah came in to tell them that lunch was ready.

"We ain't got much, considering what's been stole," she told them. "We'll have to go on short rations for a while, like people during the war."

"We are lucky to have any rations, Hannah," Helen returned. "And we'll let you apportion them just as you choose for the next few days."

For their lunch they had sardines, a slice of butterless bread apiece, and tea. After the vigorous exercise of the morning, this scanty meal failed to satisfy the sisters. They got up from the table hungry and more than ever determined to be revenged upon Rex Pepper, if he should indeed turn out to be the culprit.

Toward the end of the meal Hannah announced another bit of unwelcome news.

"I went out to git more logs from the woodshed," she said. "Chances are we won't be able to git out there much longer and we'll need all the fire wood we can stack up in the kitchen."

The girls waited, knowing that she had further news to impart.

Hannah's eyes took on a steely glint.

"I found out another thing," she said. "The blue sled is missin', the one Miss Pepper always set so much store by. It was a good sled," added Hannah grimly, "and most as good as new."

"Probably the thief took it to pack the provisions on," said Rose.

"Well, he'd better give it back before Miss Pepper finds out about it," said Hannah, with a vigorous shake of her head. "She'll have him hung up by his hind legs, so she will!"

Evidently Hannah cherished a great deal of respect for the eccentric owner of Elk Lodge. Despite their worries, the Blythe girls could not suppress a chuckle.

"No doubt but what Miss Pepper would like to hang her nephew up by his hind legs," laughed Margy. "The only trouble is, she would have to catch him first."

"Try to do it," said Rose gloomily. "Rex Pepper is a slippery customer, and no mistake."

The girls got through the long afternoon after a fashion.

Helen set up her easel by the window and worked on her picture of "Home." She had caught the spirit of the work once again and soon found herself absorbed in it. The afternoon passed rapidly enough for her.

But Margy and Rose found it extremely difficult to concentrate on any one thing. There were two rustic bookcases full of dusty books in the living room, but most of these proved heavy reading for the girls on that particular occasion. At last they gave up the attempt in despair and settled down to a two-handed game of cards.

Supper was a replica of lunch, except, perhaps, that the food was a little more scanty.

The girls went hungry to bed and, still hungry, fell asleep.

They awoke next morning to find that the storm had abated some of its violence. Snow still fell, however, and the drifts had crept up and up until, in some places, they almost covered the windows.

"If this continues much longer we shall be snowed in entirely," Rose complained.

"And with two cans of sardines in the pantry!" said Margy.

This shortage of food constituted their real worry. The continued storm would have been

irritating enough, confining them to the house as it did and making impossible any form of outdoor sport. But if food had been plentiful in the larder they could have laughed at the snow, making a joke of their captivity and turning the whole adventure into a merry lark.

But one usually finds it hard to laugh on an empty stomach. It must be admitted that the girls were not very cheerful on that second day of the storm.

All during the hours of morning they hoped for the iceboat supplies from Hammerport. Against reason they kept on hoping while the hands of the clock crept slowly around the dial, reached high noon, and began the downward descent toward evening.

Another scanty dinner and a restless, hungry night, found the girls almost desperate.

"Hannah says there isn't enough in the larder to last the day out," said Rose. She was standing at one of the front windows, staring disconsolately at the bleak, wind-swept prospect. The snow had stopped at last, but the drifts were formidable. It seemed to Rose that nothing short of a snowplow could hope to reach the lodge. "If those things don't come from Hammerport pretty soon, I'm going to try to dig my way out," she threatened.

"You wouldn't get far, I'm afraid," said Margy. She went to the front door and pulled

it open. A mass of snow fell into the room. "You see," added Margy, as Rose ran for a broom. "You might struggle through those drifts for a little way, but in the end, you'd freeze."

"I don't know but what I'd as soon freeze as starve," Rose flung over her shoulder. "Neither is a very cheerful prospect!"

During the long morning, Helen continued to work on her picture. It was nearing completion and the task absorbed her.

"Helen never knows whether she eats or not in one of her artistic dazes," said Rose, with whimsical resentment. "It isn't fair! She's the only one of us who doesn't know she's hungry!"

"Why weren't we all born artists!" cried Margy ruefully. "Oh, my poor, poor tummy! It will never be the same again!"

Noon came and went, and still no supplies from Hammerport. Lunch consisted of a few crackers and tea. The girls ate listlessly. The food was unpalatable but they had their choice of eating it or going hungry.

"I found a can of salmon," Hannah announced phlegmatically. "It was 'way down behind the flour tin."

Rose made a face.

"Salmon! Sardines! I'm so sick of them I

never want to look a fish in the face again," she cried.

"Nevertheless," said Margy soberly, "I imagine we may be very thankful for the can of salmon by dinner time!"

It was Helen who discovered it. She was sitting near the window, eager to catch the last gleam of fading light when she looked up and saw two men approaching the lodge. They wore high boots, fur jackets, and caps and—beautiful sight!—they dragged behind them a sled heaped high with provisions!

Helen forgot her picture. In fact she nearly knocked it off the easel in her eagerness to reach her sisters with the glad news.

"Food!" she cried. "Supplies from Hammerport! Come here, you folks, and see for yourselves!"

Margy and Rose came, running. One glance from the window, and they made a dash for the front door, tugging at it frantically. Snow fell in as the door opened but they did not notice it.

The fur-capped men smiled at their eagerness.

"Just luck we got through," said one of them, as he gave the sled a last gigantic tug that brought it slithering to the doorstep. "Wind cleared the snow off a bit, or we couldn't have made it. Where do you want

these, Missus?" with a gesture toward the bundles on the sled.

"Just heap them in the middle of the floor," Helen directed happily.

"We'll take care of them after that," added Margy, with significance.

When the men had gone Hannah was brought in from the kitchen. At sight of the mass of bundles she clasped her bony hands together.

"Glory be!" she cried. "We ain't goin' to starve—not yet awhile, anyways!"

What a meal they had!

"No fish!" ordered Rose.

"And plenty of vegetables," added Margy. "I'm hungry for them."

"Eggs," suggested Helen longingly. "I want a soft-boiled egg!"

She had, not one, but three, and scraped the dish in search of the last fugitive scrap.

The girls felt rich. They had food, warmth, shelter—especially food. What more had life to offer them?

"Now, let it snow!" cried Rose luxuriously. "What do we care!"

As though the weather accepted her challenge, the snow began to fall again that night. For several days it continued, no heavy storm, but a steady fall that heaped the snow higher and higher about the lodge.

"Listen, girls!" cried Rose, one morning. "The wind's rising again. Hear it howl!"

"If this keeps up we shall have to begin rationing our provisions again," said Helen anxiously. "Certainly no supplies could get through from Hammerport now."

"We are rapidly becoming snowbound," Margy admitted, with a wry smile. "The worst of it is, I fail to see what we can do about it."

Suddenly Rose screamed and pointed to the window.

"A face!" she cried. "I distinctly saw it! I—I know I did!"

CHAPTER XX

A Conference Is Held

Meanwhile, friends of the Blythe girls in New York were beginning to fear for their safety.

Working late in the newspaper office, Dale Elton frowned over a report that had just come in. He remained sunk in deep thought for a moment; then, with an air of resolve, took up the telephone.

"Dale talking," he said, when connection was made at the other end. "I've just had word that worries me, Hugh. Are you free tonight?"

Hugh replied that he was working on some briefs but suggested that Dale run uptown to his apartment.

Dale agreed. A few moments later the young newspaper man left the office, the worried frown still on his face. An hour later Hugh Dale welcomed him to his apartment. Mrs. Draper shook hands with the young journalist, of whom she was very fond, and went into the kitchen to prepare sandwiches and coffee.

"Not for me, please, Mrs. Draper," Dale protested. "I really don't want a thing to eat."

Mrs. Draper paused in the doorway.

"I've heard young men talk like that before," she replied, smiling. "But I notice that at the very first sniff of good things, they generally change their minds."

"You're tempting me," Dale chided her. "And you shouldn't! I'm proof against everything but temptation, you know."

When Mrs. Draper had gone, Dale sat down and faced Hugh across the table. Hugh collected the scattered papers, stuffed them into his brief case and smiled.

"Now for your news," he said and, as Dale hesitated: "It isn't very bad, I hope?"

"No," said Dale doubtfully. "Not yet. See here, Hugh!" he leaned across the table, suddenly very much in earnest. "Word just came to the office a while ago that there's a blizzard raging in New England, the worst and hardest they've seen in those parts for years."

Hugh sat rigid. The smile left his face.

"You are thinking of the girls, of course," he said.

Dale nodded.

"The high places are catching the worst of it," he said. "If the storm keeps up Elk Lodge will be snowed under, may be snowed under

already for all that we know to the contrary."

Hugh was silent for a moment, thinking deeply.

"The girls have provisions enough to last them some time," he suggested.

"With care, what food they have would probably last them through," Dale agreed. "The thing is that they would probably see no necessity for conserving supplies, supposing that more could be sent through from Hammerport at any time. In that case, they may find themselves short."

Hugh was silent for some time, thinking this over. Finally he roused himself to ask:

"Does the report hold out a promise that the storm may let up soon?"

Dale shook his head.

"Not a promise. That's the point, Hugh. I'm afraid the girls are in real danger."

Hugh looked at his watch.

"We can't do much about it to-night," he said. "But early in the morning I'll meet you downtown and we'll send a telegram through. If the girls can reassure us, all right. If not—" he hesitated and met Dale's eye, then, on impulse, held out his hand. "If not, we will get hold of Joe and take the first train out there. Am I right?"

"Never righter!" returned Dale heartily. "I knew you'd come through, Hugh!"

That night the tail end of the New England snowstorm reached New York. In the morning Manhattan residents woke to find the familiar streets powdered with a fleecy white covering. Not long did the covering remain white, however, where it remained at all. An army of cleaners and huge snow-shovels soon swept the main avenues and streets clean. In the poorer sections of the city numberless feet trod in the snow, trucks and cars churned it up, the sun came out and partially melted it. By ten o'clock it was an ankle deep, dirty slush.

By appointment. Hugh met Dale downtown and they went at once to a telegraph office.

"See here," said Dale suddenly, "why not use the long distance telephone? It's more direct and quicker."

"Right," agreed Hugh. "We'll get Hammerport first and make connections from there with Elk Lodge."

It took them a long time to get Hammerport on the long distance line. But at last they heard a faint voice assert "this is Hammerport!"

"We'd like to get a message through to Elk Lodge at the other end of the lake," said Dale. "Can you tell us if that is possible?"

"Just a moment, please," said the faint voice. "Hold the wire!"

They waited, not one moment, but five—ten.

Dale jiggled the receiver with all the insistence of an extremely impatient man, but his only reward was a dead silence.

"She's gone to sleep," he said savagely to Hugh. "I'll wake her up if—"

"Hello!" said the faint voice.

"Hello, yourself!" retorted Dale. "Where have you been all the time?"

"Elk Lodge does not answer," returned the voice indifferently.

In those five words Dale found all his fears crystallized. In desperation he cried:

"But they must answer! Some one must be there!"

"They do not answer," reiterated the faint voice. It was now faintly tinged with impatience. "It is thought all wires are down north of Hammerport."

"Are you sure of this?" cried Dale.

"We cannot be mistaken," returned the voice.

"Look here!" cried Dale. "Wait a minute, will you please? Is there any way that a message can be got through to Elk Lodge—by automobile or iceboat?"

"All roads are impassable," returned the voice. "No iceboat has ventured upon the lake for almost a week."

"Gosh!" cried Dale. "Then conditions *are* bad!"

A brief silence. Then that voice at the far end of the wire.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Thanks, no!" exploded Dale.

He put the receiver on the hook and turned to Hugh.

"Wires down, roads and lake impassable," he snapped. "No iceboats running for almost a week! What's your idea of the next move, Hugh?"

"To see for ourselves if the roads are impassable," said Hugh.

"My idea exactly!" Dale hesitated. "Shall we call up Joe?" he asked.

"Better," said Hugh briefly. "The old chap would never forgive us if we left him out—not if Rose is in any danger."

So Joe was called into the conference.

"I saw the papers this morning," said the "Strainer Man" briefly. "Worst blizzard New England has seen in years. Roads blocked, are they? Telephone wires down?" He took out his watch and regarded it significantly. "All right, fellows," he said quietly. "When do we start for Hammerport?"

CHAPTER XXI

The Hunting Shack

Meanwhile, what of Rose Blythe's scream and the face at the window?

Rose was sure she had seen a face. There could be no shadow of doubt about it, she insisted.

But though Margy and Helen rushed to the window and flung it wide open, admitting a wintry blast and a flurry of snow, they saw nothing to justify Rose's fright.

"Nothing here," said Margy briefly. "Nothing but a large expanse of snow and still more snow. You must have imagined it, Posie."

"I didn't," returned the younger girl indignantly. "You know I'm not given to imagining things. I saw a face, I tell you, peering at us out of the darkness!"

Her earnestness impressed her sisters in spite of themselves. Margy crossed the room again and carefully locked the window.

As she came back, she shot a quizzical glance at Rose.

"You didn't, by any chance, recognize the face, did you?" she queried.

Rose shook her head.

"It was in shadow, you know. I just saw a couple of staring eyes and the shape of a mouth—" She broke off and began to shiver. Helen regarded her anxiously. "It was the look in the eyes that scared me, I guess. It was so wild and—and crazy—"

Margy's mind jumped to Rex Pepper. Was it possible that the young scoundrel was still hanging about the lodge? After what had happened, would he dare molest them further?

In the days immediately following, the Blythe sisters had occasion to ask themselves that question several times. The lodge seemed haunted by some spectral presence. Once Helen glanced up from her painting with the certainty that unfriendly, prying eyes were upon her—only to find, upon closer investigation, that no one was about.

Twice Margy heard fumbling at her window after she had got to bed at night—to find nothing but darkness outside her window when she flung it wide.

Once Rose was sure she saw a figure lurking near the woodshed; a figure that could not have belonged to any of the inmates of the lodge since they were all gathered in the kitchen at the time.

It was impossible to verify their suspicions. No use to look for footprints. The steadily falling snow would obliterate them almost before they could be made. Yet their suspicions remained, amounting almost to certainty as the days passed.

Meanwhile, Helen at least, was making good use of her time. From the sketches she had made that first day in the woods, she selected three as subjects to transfer to canvas.

She sat at her easel near the window for the greater part of the day, working happily, indifferent alike to the weather without and the activities within the lodge.

The only thing that worried her seriously was the absence of good light. For hours in the day when she might have been painting she was forced to put away her materials and turn her easel to the wall because the light was not fit to work in.

When the supply of foodstuffs in the pantry began to run low once more, this fact was carefully concealed from Helen.

"We won't worry her," Margy said. "She has her big chance now, with this contract to fill, and we can't let anything spoil it for her."

So Margy and Rose loyally kept their own counsel, swearing Hannah to secrecy also.

"She will have to know before long, anyways," said Hannah, with a dubious sniff.

"We ain't got food enough to last us the winter, and this snow looks like it was goin' to keep up that long, at least. Never see anything like it," she added, with a dubious shake of the head, "and I've lived in these parts a right smart while, so I have!"

A few days more found the supplies in the larder running perilously low.

"Something will have to be done about it, and quickly," said Margy in a conference with Rose.

The younger girl nodded.

"Listen," said Rose. "Hear that wind?"

Margy nodded, puzzled.

"Well, it has given me an idea," Rose continued. Excitement crept into her voice. "Listen, Margy! That wind is a north wind and we go south to Hammerport. Does that tell you anything?"

"You mean that the wind may have swept the ice clear so there is a chance we might get through to Hammerport?"

"Right the first time! Go up to the head of the class." Rose watched her sister anxiously. "What do you think, Margy?"

"That there's just a chance that you may be right," said Margy quickly. "And the way things are now, we can't afford to miss any chances."

Rose hugged her sister.

"I knew you'd say so!" she cried. "You always were a good sport, Margy!"

Helen was at work near one of the windows in the dining hall and this made it easy for Margy and Rose to slip unobserved from the house. They had told Hannah what they intended to do, or try to do, but had given the woman directions not to say a word to Helen unless the latter noticed their absence and asked for the reason.

"If we don't get back by nightfall, Hannah," said Margy, half-laughing, half-serious, "you can come and dig us out of the drift!"

"Until then," said Rose gayly, "au revoir!"

She and Margy slipped out of the front door without disturbing Helen. The young artist was hard at work on her third picture, now—one of the sketches she had made of the ice-boat on the lake. Nothing less than the report of a cannon would have served to rouse her from her abstraction.

With the door of the lodge shut upon them, the two girls turned into the teeth of the storm. The bitter wind caught them, striking through their warm clothing, making their teeth chatter. They pulled the collars of their coats closer about their ears and went on. The bitter cold had formed a hard crust over the snow so that they found little difficulty in getting over the drifts. It was the wind that was their chief

enemy, and this they realized more and more as they struggled on. Their hands, even through heavy mittens, were cold. They could not control their shivering.

"If we can get our s-skates on," chattered Rose, "we'll have a chance to warm up."

They reached the edge of the lake at last and to their great joy found that part of their hope, at least, had been realized. The bitter wind, pounding relentlessly from the north, had swept part of the lake clear of drifts. The lake, frozen solid, revealed its shining surface to the girls.

"We can skate!" cried Rose joyfully. "Margy, help me on with m-mine, won't you? My hands feel half frozen."

Margy complied and, in return, was helped on with her own skates by the younger girl.

Oh, the feel of that ice beneath them; the relief of swift motion; the blood that began to tingle in them, bringing with it a delicious sense of warmth! The sisters joined hands and flew over the glistening surface.

"This is marvelous!" cried Rose. "Now if we can only get to Hammerport, our troubles are over!"

Alas for their bright hopes! It was not long before they found the going rougher. The ice was covered with a fleecy covering. Their speed was checked. They went on more slowly

for some time, then were forced to stop altogether.

Some freak of the wind had left a long stretch of ice covered thick with snow. Here and there huge drifts had piled up, giving the surface the appearance of sand dunes.

"We can't skate here," said Rose.

"No, but we can wade," retorted Margy grimly. "Come on, Posie. We aren't beaten yet."

They took off their skates and started ahead on foot. They cherished a vague hope that, perhaps, if they struggled on far enough, they would pass this spot and find the ice again cleared for them. It was a forlorn enough hope, but the girls clung to it desperately.

As they struggled on they were conscious once more of the bitter cold of the wind. Their feet, from being exceedingly painful, began to grow numb.

At last Rose stopped.

"We never can reach Hammerport this way!" she panted. "A few more of these drifts, and I'll sit down on one of them and freeze to death!"

"I guess we'll have to go back," Margy agreed reluctantly. She brushed the snow from her lashes and looked about her. What she saw reassured her and gave her fresh courage.

To the right of them, only a short distance from the shore of the lake was a small cabin. The detail upon which Margy's eyes were fixed was the ribbon of smoke that curled upward from the chimney.

"Some one is at home over there and, what's more, he has a fire," she said abruptly. "We can at least warm our fingers and toes before we start back to the lodge."

Rose studied the shack curiously.

"Funny to see signs of habitation away off here," she said. "Wonder who lives there, Margy."

"Never mind," said the older girl, turning toward the shack. "Whoever it is has a fire! That's all we need to know."

They approached the hunting shack and Margy's vigorous double rap on the door informed whoever might be within that visitors had arrived.

The door was flung open with startling abruptness. The voice of some one invisible within the shack called harshly:

"Come in!"

For a moment the girls hesitated. Then, urged on by necessity, they stepped from the bitter cold into comparative warmth and coziness.

Still the inhabitant of the shack, whoever he might be, remained invisible. As the girls

looked about them, startled, the door closed with a sharp click.

They started and faced about. Rose smothered a scream and shrank against the table. Margy's eyes flashed fire.

"So, Rex Pepper!" she cried. "We have stumbled upon your hide-out at last!"

In front of the shack door, his back against it, stood Miss Pepper's rascally nephew. There was a gleam of sneering humor in his eyes as he smiled at Margy.

"Yes, Mistress Pry," he returned, with an elaborate bow. "As you say, you have stumbled upon my humble abode—quite by accident of course. But now that you have shtumbled upon it, you are welcome to shtay as long as you like."

In disgust, Margy realized that the young fellow had been drinking. A half-empty bottle stood upon the table, a glass beside it. The cabin reeked with alcohol.

Margy turned toward the door.

"Come, Rose!" she cried, "Let's get out of this!"

But the tall figure of Rex Pepper still loomed between the girls and the door. As Margy took a step toward him, he scowled and his eyes grew ugly.

"Not so fasht!" he cried. "I've a word or two to say to you before you go!"

"There is nothing you may have to say to us which we care to listen to," said Margy levelly.

"Oh, is that so!" cried the young scoundrel. He was evidently working himself up into a drunken rage. "Well, now, I'll tell you—you'll listen to me whether you want to or not! What do you mean—" he cried angrily as Margy sought again to pass him. "What do you mean by taking possession my house, putting me out in the cold—"

"If you mean the lodge," said Margy, "it isn't your house, and what's more you know it, Rex Pepper! It belongs to your aunt and she loaned it to me and my sisters for an indefinite vacation."

"Yes!" cried Rose, becoming suddenly belligerent. "And I'd like to know what you did with our money and the provisions you stole from the lodge!"

Rex Pepper stared at the fair-haired girl and a cunning look crept into his eyes.

"So this is Margy Blythe's pretty little sister," he leered. "Well, well, always did admire blonds—"

The angry rush of words trembling on Rose's lips overflowed. Margy tried in vain to stop her.

"You're a scoundrel, Rex Pepper!" cried the younger girl. "What do you mean by sneaking around the lodge, nearly killing poor

Hannah and stealing our money? Why, you are nothing more than a common thief!"

Rex Pepper's leer grew broader. He tried to bow again and almost stretched his length on the floor.

"Pretty girls alwaysh look prettier when mad. Go on, scold poor Rex!"

"You are nothing but a common thief!" repeated Rose, raging. "You'd better tell us where our money is or we'll call up the police." For the moment she forgot that the telephone had been out of order for many days!

At her threat Rex Pepper laughed aloud.

"Thash good joke," he said. "Exshellent joke!"

The leer suddenly left his face. He grew lowering, ugly.

"Call the police, eh?" he cried. "You can't, I tell you! Want to know why? I cut the wires —thash why!"

"Come away!" cried Margy in sudden, overpowering disgust. "Come away, Rose! Let's get out of this!"

As she approached the door, Rex Pepper made a lunge toward her, clutching at her arm.

Margy evaded him, at the same time giving him a little push. Rex staggered, floundered for a moment, then stretched out on the floor.

Margy was quick to seize the opportunity.

She caught Rose by the hand, opened the door, and drew her out into the bitter cold.

"Anything is better than that reek in there," she cried. "Ugh! I'd rather freeze to death than stay another moment in that atmosphere. Drunken pig!"

The girls hurried down to the lake, intent now on getting back to the lodge as soon as possible. At first they were apprehensive lest Rex Pepper should attempt to follow them. But when they had covered a considerable distance and there was still no sign or sound of pursuit they began to breathe more freely.

"Too befuddled to follow us, or too lazy," Margy decided. "Perhaps a little of both."

They were silent and depressed on their way back to the lodge. The trip to Hammerport had failed. That in itself was enough to discourage them, considering the state of the pantry at the lodge. And their unexpected meeting with Rex Pepper had done little to add to their peace of mind.

"One thing we do know, anyway," said Rose, rousing herself from a long abstraction. "It *is* Rex Pepper who has been haunting the lodge all this time. We suspected it before. Now we know it."

"Much good may the knowledge do us," said Margy gloomily.

When the girls reached the cleared portion of the lake and put on their skates again, they found the going easier. When they reached the lodge the day was almost done. They were bitterly cold and as hungry as wolves.

"We might be going home to a good dinner if it weren't for Rex Pepper," grumbled Margy and added, unconsciously repeating the words of Miss Pepper, "I'd like to wring his neck!"

It was later that same evening that a knock at the door of the lodge brought the girls to their feet, startled and wondering.

Helen was the first to reach the door. She pulled it open and a man staggered over the threshold.

"Help me!" cried the stranger faintly. "I —I'm shot!"

CHAPTER XXII

A Desperate Attempt

While all these things were happening to the girls, Hugh Draper, Dale Elton, and Joe Morris were having their own troubles.

"What do you suppose is the matter now?" It was Joe who made the inquiry.

The train, jolting and jerking through the snow, had come to a stop for the third time in the course of the trip. The engine snorted and plunged, trying vainly to buck the drifts that retarded progress.

"Stuck again, I suppose," said Dale gloomily. "We'd probably get to Hammerport sooner if we all got out and walked."

"Have you looked at those drifts on your side of the track, boy?" inquired Joe.

"I've looked at little else for the past two hours," Dale returned morosely.

"Then don't talk about getting out and hoofing it," retorted Joe. "We might get six feet without sticking in a snowbank—with luck."

"Fine cavaliers we are," grumbled Dale.

"We start out to rescue the girls and get stuck in the snow ourselves."

"Cheer up," counseled Hugh, as the engine gave a chug and heaved forward a foot or two. "We're moving, anyway!"

"How far?" groaned Joe. "About eighteen inches. Measure 'em!"

There came another pause while the entire train crew got out with shovels and cleared the worst of the snow from the tracks. At last the train got in motion again, creeping along, engine puffing, whistle screeching.

After several hours of this mode of travel the train crawled into the station of Hammerport. Never in their lives had the boys been so glad to get anywhere.

"Never thought we'd make it," said Joe, as they stepped down on the snow-packed platform. "Now for a hotel and a room to sleep in."

"Until to-morrow morning," qualified Hugh. "Bright and early we've got to start out for Elk Lodge."

But in this intention the young men found they had counted without the weather. The storm which had shown some sign of abating the night before, broke with fresh violence in the morning.

From the windows of the hotel dining room, Hugh and Dale looked gloomily out upon the

prospect. Joe had gone to collect information from the clerk.

"Looks bad for our chances of breaking through to-day," said Hugh. "I don't think anything, man or beast, could last long in the face of this storm."

Dale shook his head gloomily.

"Looks pretty discouraging, I admit," he said. "But," ruefully, "it must seem even more discouraging to the girls, marooned at the other end of the lake."

The waiter arrived with ham and eggs and coffee. As Dale and Hugh sat down at the table, Joe came in and took his place beside them.

"Everything seems about as bad as it can be," was his discouraging report. "No ice-boats have been running on the lake for a long time—so the clerk says. Furthermore, they are not likely to run until this storm stops and the wind clears some of the snow from the lake."

"Which means?" queried Hugh.

"That no supplies have been sent out to any point north of Hammerport since soon after the storm commenced," said Joe. "Which means, of course that the girls are running very low on provisions—if they are not already in actual want."

The three finished their meal in silence and

after breakfast went at once in search of the hotel manager.

They found the latter friendly and sympathetic but discouraging.

"I appreciate how you feel," said the manager, an alert little man with side-whiskers. "You are naturally eager to rush to the aid of these charming young ladies," he accompanied this description with an arch glance that made him look very waggish indeed. "Nevertheless, it is my duty to warn you that you will find no vehicle of any sort in which to make such an attempt in weather like this."

"What?" cried Hugh. "You mean to say that we will find no one in Hammerport willing to help in the rescue—"

"Tut! Tut!" chided the little man mildly. "Forgive me for reminding you that these young ladies may be enjoying perfect health and absolute comfort for all you know to the contrary—"

"For all we know!" sputtered Dale. "Man! can't you see that that's the trouble? It's what we don't know that we're afraid of!"

Nevertheless, they found, after an hour of frantic inquiry, that the little man spoke the truth. There was no one in Hammerport sufficiently daring—or sufficiently foolish—to be willing to deliver himself to the mercies of such

a storm as raged once more over and about the New England hills.

"The best we can get is a sled and some snowshoes," Hugh announced grimly.

"I'm no snowshoe artist, myself," said Dale doubtfully. "Something tells me I would rather walk."

Hugh shook his head.

"Something tells *me*," he retorted, "that you wouldn't get very far if you tried. No, I think the snowshoes are our best reliance."

"I'll be as clumsy as a young hippo, myself," said Joe, regarding the snowshoes ruefully. "But if I must, I must! Give me a pair, will you, Hugh?"

The boys had paid generously for the use of a sled on which they hoped to carry a supply of provisions to the snowbound girls. The sled they had packed at the general store; the bundles bound securely with ropes.

Although they had been disgusted at what they termed the general cowardice of the Hammerport community, the boys found themselves surprised and a trifle daunted by the vehemence of the storm.

They had come prepared for bitter weather. They wore sweaters under their coats and newspaper "blankets" under that and still the wind cut through them like a knife. In Ham-

merport they had added worsted caps and mittens to their outfit. They wore high boots that laced up almost to the thigh. The only part of them exposed to the weather was an oval of eyes and nose and chin. And yet they had not faced that cruel wind for ten minutes before they began to suffer with the cold.

Snow clung to their eyelashes and they had repeatedly to brush it away to clear their vision. Their noses slowly became red, then purple; their faces gradually assumed the same hue.

Still they struggled on doggedly.

"What we need is a good dog team," Dale suggested. "The kind they have in Alaska where you can stand on the end of the sleigh and have nothing to do but chirrup to the dogs."

"Why didn't we think of that before?" retorted Joe, ironically. "Every one in Hammerport seemed so anxious to lend us things," he added.

On, on, through a white waste of snow while the weighted sled dragged heavily and the snowshoes became more and more unmanageable.

Somewhere in the packed sled were sandwiches and thermos bottles of hot coffee. At what they judged to be high noon the boys perched on the sled and ate the food. The

coffee warmed them somewhat, and they started on again with fresh courage.

The wind had not abated any of its violence. It beat the snow against their faces, blinding them. Their tormented eyes watered and the water turned to ice!

It was late in the afternoon when they stopped to rest and get their bearings. They were fagged out. They must have trudged miles over the ice and snow and still there was no sign of Elk Lodge.

"We can't stand much more of this," muttered Joe, staring about him with bloodshot, swollen eyes. "We should have reached the lodge long ago—" he broke off and searched the snowy prospect with increasing apprehension.

"Say, fellows," he cried, "is it possible that—we have got off the trail?"

"I've been afraid of that for some time," Hugh said quietly. "I don't know when we turned off the lake road, but I figure it must have been more than a mile back."

"Good!" said Dale wryly. "We'd do for a funny movie entitled 'Adrift in the Snow.' Chance for our pet sob sister on the New York staff to do her stuff, if she only knew it. One golden opportunity wasted!"

As Dale spoke he shuffled over in his snowshoes to the bank, hoping to get a better view

of the snowbound countryside from this vantage point and perhaps even to discover the lake road from which they had so unfortunately strayed.

That one moment Dale Elton was standing on the edge of the bank; the next moment, without a word of warning, he had disappeared!

Horrified, Hugh and Joe rushed to the spot. At the foot of the bank a dark blot sprawled on the snow!

Scrambling, sliding, falling, Joe and Hugh made their way downward to that motionless figure.

Dale's arm was doubled under him; there was a red stain on his forehead. A thick, ice-covered tree branch explained the stain.

"Struck his head in falling," said Hugh briefly. "Help me with him, will you, Joe?"

CHAPTER XXIII

Margy Has an Idea

As the man staggered into the living room of the lodge, Helen Blythe fell back with an exclamation of fright.

"Who—who are you?" she cried.

The man was young. His head drooped, his jaw sagged. One arm hung loose from the shoulder and from the relaxed fingers of the hand blood dripped slowly to the floor.

"Oh!" cried Margy. "He's hurt! Get him inside, Helen, and close the door."

As Margy ran forward, the man raised his head. The recognition was instant. Margy recoiled, as Helen had done.

"Rex—Rex Pepper!" gasped Margy. "How dare you come here?"

"I'm hurt!" said the young scoundrel, sagging against the door. "I came to you for help—to my own house!" he lifted his head and gave them a ghastly grin. "You—you've got to take me in!"

His head sagged; he swayed again as though about to fall. Instinctively the Blythe girls

jumped to his help, caught him and lowered him into a chair.

He slumped there, head on chest, arms dangling, the blood still dripping from his fingers.

"He has fainted," cried Rose, peering into his face.

"Or pretended to," said Margy grimly. "He was determined to get into this house some way, by hook or crook. This may be all a hoax! We'd better watch out, girls!"

But Helen was already busy getting the young fellow out of his coat.

"Where there's blood there's bound to be a wound," said the eldest sister, a little reproachfully. "Don't be so cold-blooded, Margy! We can't refuse to give help to a wounded man."

"We'll see how badly he is wounded," said Margy, still skeptical. "You may think what you will of me, Nell, but I tell you I know Rex Pepper better than you do."

With this parting shot Margy retired with Rose to get a basin of water and bandages.

When they came back, accompanied by a grim-faced Hannah, they found Helen examining a wound in the young man's arm.

"It bleeds a lot," she said. "I can't tell how bad it is until I wash away some of the blood."

All this time Rex Pepper was, or pretended

MARGY'S SKEPTICISM WAS SOMEWHAT JUSTIFIED.

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to be, unconscious. Watching the young scoundrel intently one might feel that Margy's skepticism was somewhat justified. Certainly Rex Pepper's face was not as white as the face of a fainting person is supposed to be. And once Margy was quite sure she saw his eyelids move and the corners of his mouth twitch.

Helen was busy with the wound, deftly wiping away the blood, probing gently to make sure that no bullet remained imbedded in the flesh.

"It isn't serious," she said at last, reaching for the bandages. "Not much more than a flesh wound. Still it must be thoroughly cleansed or there would be danger of infection."

As Helen poured a germicide over the open cut, Rex Pepper sat up with a howl of pain. He jerked his arm almost savagely from the girl's grasp.

"What you think you're doing?" he growled. "Trying to kill me?"

Helen had leaped to her feet, startled and angry.

"All right!" she said coldly. "Fix your arm for yourself, then! I'm through!"

Helen was slow to anger, but her temper, when roused, was a thing to reckon with.

Margy moved closer to the young man in the chair.

"It was a very deep faint, wasn't it, Rex?" she asked insinuatingly.

Rex Pepper shot her a sly glance and turned sullen.

"It hurt!" he grumbled. "Enough to stir up anybody!"

"Even some one in a very deep faint?" asked Margy. She stood looking down at the frowning man, a very faint smile on her lips. "I want you to know, Rex Pepper," she said slowly, "that, whomever else you may deceive, you can't fool me. *I know you too well!*"

But the wounded man turned suddenly crafty. Once more he feigned extreme weakness. He slumped, his head nodded over to his shoulder, his body drooped.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Not myself. Didn't mean to frighten you."

Now, Helen Blythe had small cause to love Rex Pepper. Since his part in the plot to abduct her, he was one of the few persons on earth whom she thoroughly despised and feared. Yet, she could not refuse to help even Rex Pepper when he so palpably needed it.

She wound bandages about the wound, fastening them neatly with surgical tape.

"How did you hurt yourself?" she asked, when the task was completed.

Rex Pepper raised his head, looked at her out of bleared eyes.

"Shot myself," he muttered. "Cleaning my rifle and it went off. Sorry to be so much—trouble."

His head nodded again, his eyes closed.

The girls drew off into a corner of the room where they might discuss Rex Pepper privately.

"What are we going to do with him?" demanded Margy abruptly. "We can't let him stay here."

"But we can't put him out in the snow," protested Helen.

"Humph!" grunted Margy. "If he got here all the way from that crazy shack of his, he can get back to it. Don't be so soft-hearted, Helen," she urged, as the latter still hesitated. "I tell you, I shouldn't be surprised if that fellow shot himself on purpose—"

"Why?" gasped Rose.

"To gain entrance to the house," snapped Margy. "He has some scheme in mind, mark my words. We are not safe," she added impressively. "We are not safe for a moment while he is under the same roof with us!"

"I believe you," said Rose. "But I don't see how, in common humanity, we can put the fellow out to-night, Margy. Why, we'd give a wounded dog houseroom in weather like this!"

"I suppose we shall have to give him shel-

ter to-night," said Margy reluctantly. "But in the morning, out he goes!"

When the girls went back to Rex Pepper they found him sunk in a drunken sleep. There was no pretense about this. He was evidently sound asleep, and when the girls tried to shake him to his senses, he raised a protesting hand as though to brush away some troublesome insect.

"Now what shall we do with him?" cried Rose.

"Leave him here," replied Margy disgustedly. "He doesn't deserve decent treatment."

"I've a better idea," said Helen. "We'll get Hannah to help us carry him into one of the bedrooms."

"And then we'll lock the door—on the outside," added Margy grimly.

Between them, they got the young man into a bedroom, the same that he had occupied before the girls' arrival at the lodge. They took off his shoes—his shirt and jacket had already been removed—and drew a blanket up over him.

Then they went out softly, closed and locked the door on the outside.

"If any one had told me that I would wait on Rex Pepper to the extent of taking off his shoes and putting him to bed," said Margy grimly, "I should have called that some one a very impolite name!"

"Another mouth to feed," interjected Hannah sourly. "And we've got too many already, considerin' what's left in the pantry."

"I wonder if Rex Pepper has used up all the provisions he stole from us," said Rose.

"Most likely!" Helen stretched herself wearily in a chair. "And now he has come to share ours and make us take care of him."

"We'll take care of him!" promised Margy. There was a look in her eyes that boded no good for Rex Pepper. "I've an idea."

"Tell us!" cried Rose eagerly. "Have you thought of some way to get rid of him?"

"Maybe," returned Margy mysteriously. "But I'm not telling now! Wait until tomorrow morning!"

She would say no more, no matter how much her sisters urged.

Worn out with fatigue, hungry and dispirited, the Blythe girls finally decided to seek their beds, hoping that the morning would bring them better fortune.

But morning dawned, as bleak and forbidding as those that had gone before. Although the snow had stopped temporarily, a high wind swept the hills, piling up fantastic hills and valleys of snow. The bare trees groaned and writhed in the grip of the blast, snow-laden branches broke and hurtled to the ground. Over everything was a bleak, greyish light, a

disheartening forecast of more bad weather.

In cold rooms, the girls got up and dressed. They were conserving logs now, for the path to the woodshed had been heaped high with snow and the supply of firewood that they had helped Hannah bring into the house was rapidly dwindling.

"The only warm place is the kitchen," grumbled Rose. The tip of her pretty nose was red. Her fingers felt numb as they fumbled with buttons and ribbons.

"If only we could use the telephone," murmured Helen. "Perhaps if we could get word through to Hammerport and let them know just what a desperate fix we're in, they would get provisions through to us in some way."

The fair-haired girl paused, hairbrush uplifted, to stare at her reflection in the mirror. Was that Helen Blythe, she wondered—that gaunt, white-faced, starved-looking girl?

"It's lucky Hugh can't see me now," was her instinctive thought. But with the coming of Hugh's name into her mind, such a wave of homesickness flooded her as made her feel physically ill.

She swayed and clutched at the dresser for support. Rose ran to her, flung an arm about her.

"Helen, dearest!" cried the younger girl.

"What is it? Are you sick? Shall I bring you a glass of water?"

Helen shook her head and smiled with stiff lips.

"I'm all right, Rose," she replied. "Just a little c-cold, I guess."

"You poor darling!" In her anxiety for Helen, Rose at once forgot her own discomfort. "Fling on something and come into the kitchen. It's bound to be less cold there, anyway."

Helen obeyed, keeping her glance carefully averted from that white face in the mirror, which, curiously enough, belonged to Helen Blythe!

In the kitchen the girls found some measure of warmth and comfort. There was a fire in the stove and Hannah had put on a pot of coffee to boil.

"The last and all," the woman remarked, turning the empty cannister upside down. "To-morrow we don't get no coffee—nor much of anything else," she remarked gloomily, as she went to open a box of very hard biscuits.

They all ate in the kitchen, for warmth's sake, and while they ate they discussed Rex Pepper.

"I stopped at his door before I came out here," Margy said. "There wasn't a sound.

Either he is still asleep or pretending to be."

"Goodness!" cried Rose. "I hope he hasn't up and died in the night."

Helen smiled.

"His wound isn't as serious as all that," she said.

"No, but wood alcohol might be," Margy said significantly. "Goodness knows what poisonous stuff he gets hold of to drink these days."

After they had finished their own scanty breakfast, Helen said:

"I suppose we shall have to take Rex something to eat. We can't let him starve to death."

"Why not?" said Rose cold-bloodedly. "Shouldn't wonder if that's what we'll all be doing before long, anyway," she added.

Surprisingly enough, it was Margy who demurred.

"I agree with Helen," she said, with all the smugness of a pussy cat when set down before a saucer of rich cream, "we cannot let even the Rex Peppers of this world starve to death!"

With her own hands she began to gather up a few dishes, placing upon them the makings of a better breakfast than any of them had had. Rose and Helen watched her wonderingly.

"Margy, have you taken leave of your

senses?" Rose protested. "Why, you are actually pampering the wretch!"

Margy smiled mysteriously and waggled a finger at her. She looked almost gay.

"Come along and watch," she said. "I'm about to try out my idea. We'll see if it works."

Helen and Rose trailed behind their energetic sister as she gathered up the plates and left the kitchen. At the door of Rex Pepper's room she paused.

"Open the door please, Helen," she said. "The key is still in the lock."

Helen obediently turned the key and opened the door.

Rex was awake but still in bed. He rolled over and eyed his visitors suspiciously as they entered the room. At sight of the tray Margy carried, his manner changed, however. There was a gleam in his eye. He sat up in bed with surprising strength for a man who had seemed so sick the night before.

"Food!" he cried longingly. "I'm starving! You are a good friend to me, Margy Blythe!"

Margy came near enough so that he could sniff the tempting aroma of coffee. Then she stopped. There she paused.

"You are very hungry, Rex Pepper, aren't you?" she asked.

Rex shot her a glance that had once more become suspicious.

"You know that without asking," he muttered.

"Very well," said Margy. "Here is food. And you may have it—on one condition!"

"Let me have your condition," growled Rex Pepper, "and then give me food! I'm starving!"

Margy set the tray on the dresser, well out of reach of Rex Pepper's grasping hands. She came closer to him while her sisters watched her curiously, wondering what her design could be.

"Listen!" said Margy. "When my sister and I found you yesterday in your shack, you boasted of having cut our telephone wire. Do you remember?"

Rex Pepper scowled.

"Good thing, too," he growled. "You'd have been setting the police on my trail if I hadn't."

"Probably," Margy returned calmly. "But now you are going to tell us where you cut that wire—and, what's more, you are going to be quick about it."

"Am I?" sneered the young scoundrel. "Watch me!"

"Very well!" Margy picked up the tray and turned to march out of the room.

Rex Pepper sat up in bed. Gone was all his bravado. Food, that had seemed almost within his grasp, was disappearing! He stretched out his hands toward Margy.

"Don't go!" he begged. "I'm sick! Starving! Give me something to eat."

Halfway to the door Margy paused.

"Where did you cut the telephone wire?" she queried inexorably.

For a moment Rex Pepper's scowl was horrible to see. Then sudden, mad cunning glinted between his narrowed lids.

"All right! You've got me!" he whined. "I cut the wire out behind the woodshed!"

CHAPTER XXIV

To the Rescue

Margy Blythe's idea had worked! Now that the girls knew where the telephone wire had been cut, it remained for them to dig their way out to the woodshed and there try to repair the damage done by Rex Pepper.

The latter had been given his breakfast; after which the tray had been removed and the door locked on the outside again.

"We'll take no chances with him," said Margy, as she pocketed the key. "Since we have taken away his shoes and socks it is safe to say he won't attempt to climb out the window into the snow. And if he has lied to us about that cut wire," she added, with a shake of her fist, "I declare I'll get down that old shotgun off the living-room wall and if there are bullets to be found, I'll use it, too!"

They put on their heaviest clothes, drew up high boots, armed themselves with a spade and shovels borrowed from the equipment of the various open fireplaces in the lodge, flung wide

the kitchen door, and fought their way along the snow-blocked path.

After considerable searching about the rear of the woodshed, they found the severed ends of the wire.

"Here it is," said Rose. "Now we have it, what do we do with it?"

"Let me see." Helen shoved her younger sister gently to one side and examined the ends of the wire. "I'm a pretty good kitchen mechanic," she laughed, "and a kitchen mechanic has to learn a few simple little tricks dealing with electric wires. Hugh once showed me how," she confided.

Helen was the only one who had thought to bring tools along. While she fussed with the ends of the wire Margy and Rose watched her with increased respect. She was a never-ending source of wonder to them, this talented sister of theirs. An artist to the fingertips, she was yet, in some ways, absurdly practical, as on this occasion!

While Margy, the resourceful, and Rose, the energetic, looked on helplessly, Helen scraped away at the wires, twisting, insulating, until the job was completed to her satisfaction.

"There!" she said, at last. "That should work. A lot depends on whether the wires are down further on toward Hammerport."

Margy had already started back toward the house.

"Let's try it," she called.

The final test was left to Helen as a tribute to the work she had done in repairing the wire. Margy and Rose watched, almost sick with apprehension as the eldest sister lifted the receiver.

"Hello!" called Helen fearfully, hopefully.

A breathless pause; then, faint, but distinct, a voice at the other end of the line!

The girls wanted to shout aloud, fling their hats into the air to celebrate. All they actually did was to listen with abated breath to Helen's conversation.

She gave a number; looked at the girls for approval.

"I'm calling the hotel," she explained. "They probably can give us more information than any one else in Hammerport." She broke off as a voice came over the wire—such a welcome voice!

"This is Elk Lodge calling," said Helen.

She inquired about conditions between the lodge and Hammerport, explaining their snowbound state and stressing the genuine peril in which they found themselves through scarcity of provisions.

"You can't get anything through?" she cried desperately. "But you *will* try, won't you,

please? We haven't supplies to last us another day—Yes, yes, please do, our situation is really desperate—'' A long pause while Helen's face gradually assumed a look of surprise. Surprise presently gave place to distress, distress to fear.

''Wait a moment,'' she said at last, in a tone scarcely recognizable as Helen's. ''I don't want to misunderstand you. You say three young men started out in the face of a blizzard for the lodge?'' As Margy and Rose cried out, Helen impatiently held up her hand for silence.

''How long ago was this?'' she asked. ''A—a week, you say? And nothing has been heard from them—Oh, you have! Where are they then? Oh, please, please tell me quickly!—Bailey's shack?—Where is that, please?—Yes, yes! I'm listening. I hear you perfectly!''—Another long pause while Helen's sweet mouth compressed itself into a tragic line and her sisters watched her, and with impatience to konw the facts that lay back of that disjointed conversation.

''I see,'' said Helen, at last. ''And can nothing be done for them? Can't you get relief through to them? Yes, I understand—Yes, I know you will do your best—Oh, just a minute! Can you give me the telephone number of Bailey's shack?—Thank you, again—You are very, very kind—Good-by!''

Helen turned to her sisters, who at once fell upon her with questions.

"The boys must have heard that we were snowbound and probably guessed that we were in desperate straits," she explained quickly. "At any rate, they arrived in Hammerport some days ago and started at once for the lodge. They had a sled packed with provisions—" She choked, paused.

Margy seized her arm, shook her with unintentional roughness.

"What happened to them?" she cried huskily.

With an effort, Helen controlled herself.

"They met with an accident," she said, hurrying on. "They didn't seem quite clear as to what had actually happened, only that they knew the boys did find shelter finally in a place called Bailey's shack. There seems to have been a telephone there and the boys used it to call Hammerport."

"And was no help sent to them?" cried Margy indignantly. She had risen and was striding up and down the room.

"No one could get through," Helen explained. "Drifts are piled six feet deep. But I've got the number of the shack," she added.

"Call it!" cried Margy, stopping abruptly before the telephone table. "Call it quickly,

Helen. Anything may have happened to them by this time!"

Helen got the number, forcing herself to speak quietly.

"Hello!" The voice was Joe's, faint, but very distinct.

"Hello, Joe!" Helen was almost hysterical. "This is Helen! Yes, no mistake—The wire was cut—Never mind about us—Joe, tell us—How are you?—You lost your provisions?—None left! None at *all?* Oh, Joe!—What's that about Dale?—Dreadful—Listen, Joe! I haven't the slightest idea how we are going to do it, but we'll win through to Bailey's shack someway and bring provisions with us.—Hello! Hello, Joe—"

She stared at the dead instrument. No sound came from it except a dull buzzing. For several seconds she persisted and when still no answer came was forced to the inevitable conclusion.

"The wires are really down now, I guess!" she said. "The 'phone is absolutely dead!"

Impatiently, Margy took the instrument from her sister and jiggled the receiver frantically. She abandoned the 'phone finally, and turned to Helen.

"Tell us the worst," she said steadily. "What's the matter with Dale?"

"He fell and struck his head," Helen explained. She stopped, hesitated, and presently tears brimmed over from her eyes and rolled, unheeded, down her face. "They lost most of their provisions in the snow. There was a snowslide and the boys were able to rescue only a few things—"

"I know this Bailey's shack!"

The Blythe girls looked up and saw that Hannah had come into the room.

"It ain't far from here," continued the woman. "Many's the time I've gone to it for butter and eggs—"

Margy was on her feet, shaking Hannah's arm.

"Could you tell us how to get there?" she cried. "Could you?"

"I could," retorted Hannah, with a shake of her head. "But you could never reach it! Not in this weather."

"We've got to try!" exclaimed Margy, shaking her again. "Listen!"

As briefly as possible she explained what Helen had learned over the telephone. Hannah made no further objections. Instead, she marched off to the kitchen and returned in a few moments with a small square box.

"Beef cubes," she explained briefly. "I had 'em laid away against next week when the chances were there wouldn't be nothing else.

Best thing in the world for a sick man," she added.

Margy slipped the box into her pocket, then impulsively put her arms about the gaunt New England woman and gave her a grateful hug.

"You—you're a darling, Hannah!" she cried, and turned away with a strangled sob.

Helen and Rose exchanged glances.

"She cares for that young newspaper man more than she wants to admit," the glances seemed to say and, just then, Margy would have been the very last to deny the imputation.

Once more the girls bundled themselves in heavy clothes, drawing the boots up tight, pulling hats close over their ears.

Hannah found an old compass and presented it to them.

"Go along the lake as far as the shack where you say you found Rex Pepper t'other day," she directed them. "Then turn off to the west and keep goin' straight ahead. After a while you'll come to a hill an on the other side o' that hill is Bailey's shack. You can't miss it. It's got a roof painted bright red. It's a high, peaked one, so's it'll be swept clean of snow by the wind."

The girls selected some of the few remaining stores in the pantry and stuffed their pockets and bags. Then, with skates flung over

their shoulders and in their hearts a resolution to do or die, they started out for Bailey's shack.

With a sick feeling of dismay they saw that it had begun to snow again.

"If we lose our way and get caught in a blizzard," Rose said dismally, "much good we'll do the boys!"

"We won't get lost," said Margy grimly. She was thinking of Dale—and of the beef cubes in her pocket. "Step up, girls! We are going to get to Bailey's shack!"

The wind whipped them; the snow settled upon their lashes, stung their faces; drifts blocked their path. They were cold despite their heavy clothing; their backs began to ache —and still they struggled on.

Back at the lodge, Hannah sighed and turned into the kitchen.

"Nothing but trouble," she muttered. "It'll be a mercy if them girls get through alive!"

The words were scarcely spoken when Hannah heard stealthy steps behind her. She turned, but not in time! Something struck her over the head, an exquisite pain shot through her, and she crumpled to the floor.

A few moments later, Rex Pepper stole from the lodge. Beneath his arm was a tin box, padlocked.

CHAPTER XXV

Red Roof

The storm increased in fury. The wind howled viciously, like a band of wolves on the kill. The snow, wind-driven, whirled about and about in a maniacal dance of fury.

The girls gasped, panting for breath.

"We can't see—ten feet ahead," Helen labored.

Fear for the boys lent them strength; fear and an unacknowledged belief in their own hearts that they must keep moving if they cared to live.

When they left the lake road it seemed to them that the going became steadily worse. The crust of snow held their weight in most places, but now and then one of them broke through, sinking waist-high into a smother of snow.

Still they kept on, guided only by the compass needle. They could see scarcely three feet before them. The falling snow was a curtain of mist, an all-enveloping shroud.

"Better—keep close—together," gasped

Margy. "If we become separated, we might as well say—good-by—"

As she said the word "good-by," Margy abruptly disappeared!

Rose gasped and rushed forward, Helen at her side. The feet of the younger girl slipped from under her and she was only saved from falling by Helen's strong grip on her arm.

"There's a hill here!" cried Rose. "Just where Margy disappeared. Oh, Margy, where are you?"

"I'm—all right," a voice called up to them. If it was faint and half-hysterical, it was still, unmistakably, Margy's. "I came down feet first and I'm half-smothered in snow. Aside from that, there's no damage done."

Helen and Rose slipped and slid down the steep hill, joining the half-smothered, but unhurt, Margy.

"I just stepped over the edge, that's all," she said, in reply to their questions. "How was I to know there was a hill there, anyway? I've still got the compass," she added, with a broken laugh. "When I felt myself falling, I gripped it for dear life!"

The girls could not know that Margy had fallen over the bank not forty feet from the spot where Dale had met with a similar but far more serious mishap. They only knew that

Margy had most fortunately been saved from injury.

Again they took up their weary struggle. They were tired to the point of exhaustion, yet not one would admit it. Their feet seemed weighted with lead; their shoulders ached with the effort to force their weary limbs onward; the keen wind had turned the blood in their veins to ice.

Rose fought a creeping drowsiness. Again and again her head dropped forward, her eyes closed, her feet moved forward automatically, unguided by her will.

Once she staggered and plunged head foremost into a drift. How good and soft it felt—and warm! She was angry when Helen pulled her to her feet and forced her onward. This weary, plodding misery—would it never end?

At last came a cry from Margy.

"A house—and, Helen—it has a steep, red roof!"

"Bailey's shack!" ejaculated Helen, and began to cry. She did not feel the tears as they coursed down her face. She only knew that her heart had come to life within her; was suddenly warm and swelling with gratitude. She put an arm about Rose and together they floundered through waist-high drifts to the door of Bailey's shack.

Margy was before them. She found the door and pushed it open. A flood of warmth greeted the girls as they staggered over the threshold.

Blinded by the whiteness outside, it was a moment or two before they could see the objects in the room. Then they made out some rude bunks flanking the wall, a rough table in the center of the room, some chairs, a stove.

In one of the bunks lay a man. His back was to them, but at the feel of the icy air from the open door he turned, muttering, and flung an arm up over his head.

Slowly the girls approached. Did they know this man with the week's growth of beard, the bandaged head, the staring eyes?

Suddenly Margy gave a little cry and knelt down beside the bunk.

"Dale!" she cried. "Dale! Don't you know me? It's Margy!"

"Margy Blythe! Margy Blythe!" muttered the young fellow. "Knew a girl once with a name like that. Let's see now, where shall we go—dinner or dance?"

Margy got up from her knees and faced the pitying girls.

"Some one find a pan and melt some snow in it," she ordered. "Melted snow should make good broth. Thank goodness I saved the beef cubes as well as the compass!"

An hour or so later, Hugh pushed open the

door of Bailey's shack and stared, unbelievingly, at the picture within.

Dale, his face washed, his hair combed, was propped up in the bunk. His eyes followed the brisk figure of Margy Blythe as it whisked about the one room of the shack, bringing order out of chaos.

At the stove one fair-haired girl was melting snow in a pan while at the table another fair-haired girl dropped beef cubes into cracked and broken mugs.

"Girls!"

Hugh rushed forward, caught Helen in his arms and kissed her. He kissed Margy and Rose too—"just so there would be no hard feelings!"

Joe stood staring in the doorway for a moment; then repeated Hugh's performance—with emphasis. As Rose afterward put it, "they all had a sobbing good time."

It was an hour or so before they could discuss with any degree of calm the nearly desperate situation in which they found themselves.

"We are the blind helping the blind," said Hugh ruefully. "The provisions of both camps are nearly exhausted with no chance whatever, apparently, of replenishing."

"To-morrow or next day, we'll be eating shoe leather," agreed Margy gloomily. "And

there's Dale. He needs a doctor's care if anyone ever did!"

"Poor old chap!" and Joe frowned. "That was a nasty crack he gave his head when he fell over the snowbank. Nearly ended him, shouldn't wonder. Between that and the exposure and lack of food, it's a wonder he hasn't passed out altogether."

"He may yet, if we don't get him to a doctor," said Margy bluntly.

Dale had fallen into an uneasy sleep. Beneath the week's growth of beard his face wore a ghastly pallor.

"How did you lose your supplies?" Helen asked abruptly.

Hugh explained how he and Joe had carried the injured man to Bailey's shack.

"It was lucky for us we found this shack," Joe interjected. "Otherwise we would never have lived to tell the story!"

"After we had done what we could for Dale," Hugh continued, "we went back to rescue the sled with the provisions. Imagine our reaction when we found that there had been a snowslide during our absence and that the sled, provisions and all, had been snowed under!"

The girls could appreciate to the full the tragedy of such a happening.

"Couldn't you dig them out?" Rose inquired.

"We tried," Joe said. "We got a few things. But it was late and desperately cold. Besides, we were afraid to leave Dale alone too long in the shack for fear he would 'pass on' during our absence."

"In the morning," Hugh added briefly, "we found there had been a fresh snowfall overnight. If there had ever been any chance of rescuing the sled and provisions, it was gone then."

Suddenly Joe jumped to his feet.

"There's some one prowling about outside!" he cried. "I distinctly heard footsteps!"

"The wind, probably," said Helen.

But Joe was at the door.

He jerked it open suddenly. Bending over, he studied something in the snow for a moment, then said in a low voice:

"Come here, folks! Be quick!"

Footprints again. Not their own, they realized instantly, for the snow would have already obliterated them.

Joe was already flinging on his great coat, pulling on his boots. The girls, breathless, followed his example.

"I knew I heard some one prowling about," Joe reiterated. "If we're quick we can pick up his trail before the snow wipes it out!"

In a very few moments the girls and the

boys, all but Dale, were outside the shack, following the clear trail of those freshly made footprints.

After a while the footprints grew close together as though the author of them had paused for a moment to rest.

"We're gaining on him," said Hugh in a low voice. "He cannot fear pursuit, or he would not have halted so near the shack."

Suddenly, without warning, directly ahead of them they saw a man's form plodding heavily through the snow.

Hugh gave a shout and darted forward. The man whom they had been following whirled about, startled. The girls saw his face plainly. It was Rex Pepper!

Too late he started to run. The snow clogged his feet. His bandaged arm impeded him. Hugh was upon him in two great leaps. Together they fell into a smother of snow, rolling over and over.

Snakelike, Rex wriggled from Hugh's grip and struggled to his feet.

"Don't let him get away!" shrieked Margy excitedly.

She darted in the fugitive's path, tripped him with an extended foot. As he fell for the second time, something was jerked from the crook of Rex Pepper's arm. It was a tin box with a padlock!

Rex, frowning, reached for the box. Margy kicked it aside.

"Take care of that box, Joe!" she cried. "It's valuable!"

Joe Morris picked up the box and handed it to Rose; then went to Hugh's aid. Between them they soon quieted the furious young scoundrel. Hugh found a handkerchief in his pocket and with this they bound their prisoner.

"Be careful," said Helen pityingly. "His arm is hurt, Hugh! Don't be too rough with him!"

Margy took the tin box from Rose.

"Containing many thousand dollars' worth of gilt-edged securities!" mused the dark-haired girl, eyes glinting at the thought of what Miss Pepper would say when the stolen bonds were handed back to her! "I think she will be apt to remark that her social secretary has made good use of her time!"

"Girls!" The sharp cry from Rose brought them all to attention. The young girl stood some distance from the others, hand to eyes, peering through the snow. "Do you see what I see?"

A shape loomed up through the mist before them, a shape like a great bird, wings spread.

Margy sat down in the snow, the tin box clutched to her breast.

"They are running the iceboats again!" she

cried, sobbing. "Girls! Hugh! Joe! Now we can get Dale to a doctor!"

The time is several days later. The scene, Elk Lodge.

Helen sits near a window, painting. It is her fifth picture and, judging from the smile on her lips, Helen finds it good.

"I'll finish it to-morrow," she said.

Rose looked up from the letter she was reading. She, too, was smiling.

"Think you can finish your last picture by the end of next week, Nell?" she asked.

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," returned her sister, and added: "Why?"

"This letter is from Annabelle," explained Rose, holding up the closely scrawled sheets. "She says Lossar-Martin wants us back a week from next Monday." Annabelle Black shared the millinery trimmings counter with Rose. Despite the difference in looks and disposition, the two girls were excellent friends.

Helen gave the younger girl a curious glance.

"You will be glad to leave the lodge, won't you, Posie?" she asked.

Rose shrugged.

"Who wouldn't after all that has happened here?" she demanded. "Even with Rex Pepper safe and snug in jail, I still imagine I see faces at the window!"

Helen nodded, working busily at her picture.

"Poor Hannah has suffered more than any of us. I'll never forget coming back to the lodge to find her bound and gagged and with a lump on her head as big as a goose egg."

"I told you Rex Pepper has some secret reason for wanting to gain access to the lodge." Margy came into the living room, closing the door to one of the bedrooms softly behind her. "He had hidden the tin box of bonds somewhere about the house and he just waited until we got out of the way to hit poor Hannah over the head, seize his tin box, and make good his escape."

Helen frowned and shook her head.

"What I can't understand," she said, "is why he followed us to Bailey's shack."

"Probably heard us talk over the 'phone about going there," said Margy, "and thought he could steal himself some food. Remember, he was in a pretty desperate situation."

"He's in a worse one now," said Rose. "I hope the judge gives him ten years in jail, with hard labor!"

Helen chuckled. She turned to Margy, brush poised.

"How is Dale?" she asked, nodding toward the door Margy had closed so gently.

"Fine," said the dark-haired girl. "Doctor says he will be right as a trivet in a few days.

Dale wants to get up, but I won't let him. I think he needs a little pampering."

Helen nodded.

"Too bad Hugh and Joe had to go back to New York," she said. "Think of the good time we might have had this week if they had stayed."

"Business men," said Margy sententiously, "must work!"

"Margy Blythe," called a voice from behind the closed door, Dale's voice, "where are you?"

Margy turned away with a sigh of resignation.

"Dale Elton is getting to be a most hopelessly spoiled young journalist," she complained. "But just wait till I get him back to New York!"

Behind her back two fair-haired sisters exchanged glances.

Shamelessly, Rose giggled.

THE END

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